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COAL-MINER

COAL-MINER

By

G. A. W. TOMLINSON

Preface by

ARTHUR BRYANT

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PREFACE

THE author of this book is an unemployed miner who for some years has supported a wife and a child on twenty-six shillings a week. He comes of mining stock and looks it. I first met him a year ago in the spring of 1936, leaning over the canteen bar of that remarkable institution, Ashridge, where one may meet anybody at any moment. He had come there for a week's course with a North Country scholarship, and, having borrowed a suit of clothes from a brother in good employment in London, his appearance at that moment, for all the angular splendour of his physique, scarcely suggested a coal-miner. He told me that he had been looking for books in the College Library, and when I asked what books, replied Byron and Shelley. To my surprise, for he did not look a bookish fellow, I gathered from his talk that he knew a good deal about them.

Presently I asked him where he came from, and he told me—the Nottinghamshire coal-field. In the course of our talk over a glass of beer he told me a good deal about himself. He spoke of the great forest that skirts his home town, with such enthusiasm and feeling that I asked

him if he had ever written anything. He said no, but agreed after some hesitation to try and write a short article for the *Ashridge Journal* on what Sherwood had meant to him in his life as a miner. The effect that he left on my mind was that he was an unconscious poet. He spoke with fervour and a simple and intensely moving eloquence of the men and women of his native place—the mining community whose blood flowed in his veins and of which he was so justly proud. He was no intellectual, but in appearance and outlook an ordinary working Englishman, yet he spoke better than any intellectual I had ever met.

A month later I received his manuscript. Part of it was very good : part of it less so. His experience of writing was obviously negligible. Yet passage after passage, written in words of one syllable, bore the unmistakable impress of the born writer. I sent it back to him, with suggestions for improving the less happy passages and with the kind of hints on the art of writing which most of us receive—to little purpose—while at school. Another week passed and I received the manuscript again. I did not have to re-write a single word or sentence. The article appeared in the *Ashridge Journal*, and with a few trifling alterations and omissions has been reprinted in these pages in Chapter X.

That was the genesis of this book. I realise

that it will probably meet with a good deal of criticism. For among a certain class of person there will be a sense almost of indignation that the product of a coal-mining community, spoon-fed on Socialism from childhood, should have reacted so spontaneously against everything for which Socialism stands. He seems to have done so, not because he was more fortunate than his fellows, or enjoyed, or suffered (whichever way one looks at it) any contacts which were not theirs, but simply because he was an unconscious poet with a poet's gift for perceiving experience more intensely than the average man. The scales of his inner consciousness weighed up the facile mechanical philosophy that would reduce all life to the rule of the dullest and least imaginative, and found it wanting. Born into a family of Socialist stalwarts, this loyal and affectionate son and brother found himself a self-made Conservative. In a community where Conservatives are few it must have required intense courage on the part of so friendly a man to have raised that banner of rebellion.

Mr. Tomlinson's book differs from that of every other work of its kind that I have read in that its author, though he has the unconscious gift of expressing himself in the language of the Bible, is not a sophisticated person. Most writers, particularly those who spring from what the Marxists love to call the proletariat, are

"intellectuals," who, though to be found in all classes, are anything but representative of the average Englishman. Nor does the literature they produce, however demagogic its purpose, show any understanding of the views and instincts of the ordinary man, even though it may echo his favourite political catch-cry of the moment. Such literature may be very admirable propaganda, but in the true sense of the word it is not literature at all, for it never even begins to delineate life.

I have recently been reading a very interesting example of the kind of publication to which Mr. Tomlinson's book is so refreshing a contrast. It was called *The Road to Wigan Pier* and was, I believe, one of the choices of the "Left Book Club." It was written by a young literary man of refined tastes who at some apparent inconvenience to himself had "roughed it" for a few weeks at Wigan and Sheffield. The impression left by the first part of his book is that Wigan and Sheffield are Hell: the corollary, worked out with great skill in the second part, that every decent-hearted man and woman, sooner than allow such conditions to endure a day longer, should at once enrol in the ranks of those who are seeking change by revolutionary methods. The weakness of the argument lies in the fact that revolutionary change, whatever it may hope to achieve, involves not only the blood-bath—a

terrible thing to contemplate in an overcrowded island that cannot even feed itself in the event of any breakdown in its economic organisation—but the loss of individual freedom of choice and the end of democratic government: the experience of Russia and Spain proves this. But there is an even more fatal weakness in the premises, for though Wigan and Sheffield may perhaps genuinely seem Hell to a super-sensitive novelist paying them a casual visit, they do not seem Hell to the vast majority of people who live there. That is just the difference between propaganda and reality. And it is just the difference between what so often to-day passes for literature and the unpretending book to which I have written this Preface.

ARTHUR BRYANT.

COAL-MINER

CHAPTER I

HUNGER

I WAS born in a colliery company's house in a small mining town in Nottinghamshire. The house was one of a long row, all exactly alike. The front door faced on to another row of "company" houses just the same as ours ; but where the people in the other row had a view from the back which included green fields, we looked out on to a row of ash-pits. If one moved to the side of the window it was possible to see a little further between the ash-pits to where the pit headgear stood. It was my sole ambition, as a child, to "flit" to the other row because of that field at the back. I am told that I became a perfect nuisance to my parents because of my continual requests for a "flit."

When it rained the alley between the ash-pits became a bog and I was not allowed to go out. When it was hot in the summer the stench from the ash-pits would make me sick and I didn't want to go out. The first few years of my childhood seemed to be taken up with two things—

watching the raindrops hitting the big puddle near the door and causing funny little spouts of water to jump up from the puddle—Jumping Jacks I used to call them—and being hungry. I always seemed to be hungry.

They said that I was born hungry. My mother had been unable to obtain proper nourishment for some weeks before I was born and I greeted the world one May morning with a demand for food. Since that day I have been constantly demanding food with varying success. It would be impossible to tell of my childhood without mentioning hunger because, of all the things of which a child might be afraid, hunger was the most fearful to me. I cannot believe that the average person realises the meaning of the word, for if he did nobody would be allowed under any circumstances to suffer from it. Sometimes people have said, after a day in the country, or a few hours in the garden, that they have been “gloriously” hungry. They weren’t hungry at all. There is nothing “glorious” about being hungry. I mean the kind of hunger that hurts the stomach and tortures the mind; the kind that made me hate my brothers because they wanted their share of the food at home; the kind that made me thank so prettily the shopkeeper who occasionally gave me biscuits whilst I hated him for giving them, and even made me hate the few scrawny hens that used to be able to find some-

thing to eat in the mud of the back alley. I used to throw cinders to drive them away. Perhaps I was not a very nice little boy, but then I was a hungry little boy, and hungry people are seldom nice.

Though those hatreds left me as soon as I had managed to obtain food there was one hatred which persisted in my mind and which still persists, growing stronger as the years go by—the hatred of the word “Strike.” The unspeakable misery that has been inflicted upon countless children by strikes is a blot upon Trades Unions and coal-owners alike.

“Why is there no dinner to-day, Mother?” I would ask.

“Because the men at the pits are on strike.”

“What are they on strike for?”

“Because they want money to buy food.”

That was the kind of conversation that sent me crying to bed time after time. It never seemed to me to make sense then, and it still doesn't. They said it was the “Union” that kept the men away from the pit, and in my childish mind “Union” became Unicorn. I reckoned that a Unicorn must be a pretty fearsome sort of a monster if it could keep my Dad away from the pit. Sometimes during a strike the children would be fed in the local school or Mission House and we would have to march through the street with our spoons and basins in our hands. I can feel the

back of my neck turning red as I write of that walk through the streets. Many times I have hidden my spoon and basin under a hedgerow and sat in the nearby woods munching a turnip stolen from the fields, and then gone home, pretending to my parents that I had had my dinner.

Then one awful summer the grown-ups crowned everything—they fed the children in the market square. The heat of the sun melted the asphalt beneath our feet as we stood at the stalls which were used as tables, and the smell of stew, tar, petrol and stale fish was unbearable.

There was one stall which was always used on market days as a sweet stall, and I used to run all the way from school in order to get a place on that particular stall, because there was always a faint scent of peppermint clinging to the boards, and if one kept one's head as near to the boards as possible it sort of helped to keep the other scents at bay. Keeping the head down also prevented one from seeing the amused stares of groups of lookers-on who seemed to find some kind of entertainment in the spectacle. All these things served to create in me a distrust of grown-up people which caused me to seek solitude on every possible occasion, and in only one place could it be found—in the great forest a mile from my home—Sherwood Forest.

There I would lie hour after hour trying to

work it all out. What was this Union? Why did it keep Dad away from the pit? Why should there be plenty of food in the market square and none at home? I never managed to straighten it out in my mind and the only things that emerged from those hours of solitude and thinking was a hatred of the word strike and a fear of the Union. Let me hasten to add that I do not hold the Union entirely responsible for my hunger as a child, nor am I against Trades Unions in any way. It is often said amongst the men of the pits, "that if there were no bad bosses, there would be no Unions," and there is a good deal of truth in what they say. But I firmly believe that if only a fraction of the money wasted by strikes and lockouts had been used to place the case of the miner before the public in a proper manner, much more would have been achieved than has been by the shortsighted policy of striking. We had a wonderful example of the desire of the public to see fair play, once they are in possession of the true facts, a few months ago during the miners' campaign for a two shillings per day increase, simply because the miners' leaders went to the trouble of telling the country about it instead of striking.

Sometimes, after days of semi-starvation, a great wave of hunger would come over me, and I would be unable to control myself. One day, on coming home from the woods, and finding

no one in the house, I began to pry around in the pantry. Standing on a chair to look on the top shelf, I found a newly roasted joint of beef, weighing perhaps three pounds. There came upon me that awful hunger, and unable to control myself I reached it down. I ate the lot, tearing at it like a dog, and all the time I knew what the consequences would be. I knew that I should be thrashed as I had never been thrashed before, but it didn't stop me gorging myself with the meat until I was sick. Then I sat in the house, waiting until my parents discovered the empty plate, and handed to me the thrashing which I admitted to myself was richly deserved.


My mother wept whilst I was being thrashed and I thought at the time that it was because of the loss of the meat. I know now that that was not the reason at all. I have seen her weep many times since then.

Once I found three eggs in a hedgerow ; they had been laid by a hen straying from a nearby farm. I took them to the farmer's wife and she said that I could keep them. I boiled them in a tin in the woods and ate them. That was the first time that I had ever had a whole egg to myself. I was twelve years old.

I am sorry to have dwelt so long upon so unpleasant a subject as hunger. It may be that I was what the mining folk call "a real

'ungry-nosed kid," that is a child who wants more food than most children.

I believe that the day of the strike as a means of securing better things is almost over, and that both sides are beginning to see the folly of it. The children who stood in the market-place to eat are mothers and fathers to-day, and it may be that many of them were also "'ungry-nosed kids" like me. Perhaps they will remember the shame of it all, and resolutely set their faces against such things. I may be accused of being unduly optimistic when I say that I believe that they will do so, but I do believe it.



CHAPTER II

MY HOME

IN spite of its many vicissitudes I look back upon my childhood with much delight, for my home life held many simple but beautiful pleasures. To think of my home is to think of a gleaming fireplace—a fireplace upon which my mother had spent many hours of labour with blacklead and brush in order to get that polish on it ; a spotless red-and-white tiled floor, and the appetising scent of baking bread. No home seems to be complete without the scent of fresh-baked bread. It is as inseparable from the English home as the scent of the hay is from the fields or the rank odour of the bracken from the forest. Walk into a home in which the pleasant scent of baking assails the nostrils, and one can say with certainty : “ Here is a happy home, an English home ! ” All the skill of the baker can never put into a loaf that sweetness and flavour which the housewife gets into her bread. Nor can he expect to do so, for baking is essentially a housewife’s job. I remember when, as a child, I read the story of Alfred and the cakes, that I had the greatest difficulty in being at all sorry for

him. Anybody who let good bread burn was, I thought, deserving of all he got in the way of invasions and battles. Sometimes, instead of the ordinary round loaves, Mother would make what we called flap-jacks—big flat cakes about as big as a large dinner plate, and we children would be on our very best behaviour so that we might have a large piece of flap-jack split open whilst still warm and spread with beef dripping. Modern mothers to-day would blench at the thought of warm bread and dripping for their children's supper, but it never did us any harm. Another dish of which we were very fond was "water-whelps." "Water-whelps" are pieces of dough taken fresh from the mixing and boiled in a pan. It would kill some people to eat them, but with a spot or two of black treacle on them we children loved them. I don't remember ever being kept awake at night through eating them either. It was in such simple ways as this that my mother, harassed always by the shortage of money, taught us to love our home. Always she would be scheming for us, always planning in advance so that she might give us these small pleasures; ever striving to keep us clean in mind and body and teaching us the futility of hatred even though we went hungry when others had plenty. A typical collier's wife, clean without being faddy, proud without being arrogant, masterful without being unwomanly and patient

as the earth beneath which her husband laboured, she made our home a happy place.

Sometimes there would be rumours of an accident at the pit and though Mother never told us, we knew that she was troubled. Then we would sit quietly together on the sofa whilst she went on preparing the supper for a man who might never need it. Those long waits on the sofa whilst the big collier's fire gleamed and danced, throwing its light into the old-fashioned kitchen dresser and sparkling on the glass knobs of the drawers, are still vivid in my mind. God alone knows what fears she kept hidden from us and how with iron control she continued to attend to the cooking of the supper. Then, as Father's heavy tread was heard coming along the yard, she would deftly put out the food so that he might drop into his chair and begin eating at once and we children, sensing that the tension was at an end, would begin our games upon the hearth-rug.

Our home was sparsely furnished—a table scrubbed as white as a sheet, a few chairs, also scrubbed white, an old-fashioned reddish-coloured kitchen dresser, a sofa covered with black American leather and a sewing-machine, was about all we had, except for the few bits of furniture in the bedrooms along with the old iron-and-brass bedsteads. It was surprisingly comfortable though. I have been in many much

more expensively furnished houses that were far less comfortable. When the long miserable winter nights were upon us Mother would pull the old sofa up to the fire and tell us the old stories which have delighted the hearts of countless children, whilst deep down in the earth my father laboured to provide us with the necessities of life. My home, for all its hardships, was a wonderful place, as English homes always have been.

Whilst there is much in the lives of miners that is to be deplored, whilst there is poverty in plenty and many things which ought to be altered, the tendency of modern writers to paint pictures of sheer black despair is also to be deplored. The miner is not, and never has been, the miserable object that these writers would have the general public believe, and the descriptions of home life given in many so-called realistic novels are highly objectionable to the home-loving miner. His home is not the place of greasy pots piled in the sink and stinking pit rags so often described by intellectual propagandists, nor is he for ever harbouring morbid hatreds of his mates and dark thoughts of murdering his wife and children. If a count could be taken I should imagine that the figures would show that the morbid novelists themselves are more likely to do that kind of thing.

My home was not like that and few of those

around it were so. There are homes in this town which people earning twice the amount of money that the miner earns would be proud to call home. My home, as I have said before, was poorly furnished, poverty knocked often at the door; father, and later we, his sons, had to wash in turns at the sink, but to suggest that because of these things we were wallowing in misery and filth all the time is utterly ridiculous, and the miner himself would be the first to say so.

When I was quite young I was always surprised when I walked into any house in our street—particularly on a rainy day. The astonishing difference between the street and the kitchen always made me feel strangely happy. Outside the streets would be grey; water splashing down the broken gutter-pipes and leaving great wet patches on the wall, old leaking water-tubs brimming over and washing channels in the dirt of the yard, miserable-looking fowls wandering about in the mud—everything looking utterly desolate and miserable. Inside everything was so different and not even the hunger could make me feel miserable at such moments. I would sit quiet as a mouse watching the rain splashing on the tops of the ash-pits or trickling down the window, whilst in the fireplace “the collier’s fire” would be one big red glow making everything within the room glint and sparkle. The

picture of a miner's home is never complete without a big fire. It is the one real blessing of a miner's life. Getting cheap coal as miners do they do not stint the fire ever. One can stand hunger much better if one is warm and can sit looking at a big fire.

I remember one time, however, when even the fire failed me. There had been trouble in the pit, and we were caught unawares without a stock of coal. It was November, and each day I used to race home from school with my teeth chattering with cold, but anticipating the thrill of rushing into the fire-lit kitchen. On this particular day there was just a tiny glow in the bottom of the grate. Picking up a bucket I hurried down into the darkness of the cellar with the intention of getting coal. I could not find a cobble. I was dumbfounded. It was unbelievable that there should be no coal at all. In the bad times I knew that I could expect to go short of food and clothes, but there had always been coal. It was one of the most painful moments of my childhood as I stood in the gloom of the cellar trying to realise the situation. Everything seemed to have gone smash. We were, I felt, really starving to death now. It was a long time before I got it all clear in my mind as I stood crying. When I came out I was as black as any collier, having wiped the tears away time after time with my blackened hands.

I was sorely puzzled as a child over the drabness of the colliery rows, particularly after I discovered certain streets in the residential part of the town lined with trees. I was never able to decide which had been put there first—the trees or the houses. Trees are wonderful things, for they can make the most miserable place take on a totally different aspect. I used to plant acorns between the kerb-stones and pray for them to grow, but they never did. Once I spent a whole afternoon planting acorns in this way ; crawling the whole length of the street. The other children in the street were highly amused, and waiting until I had planted the whole of the street they then proceeded to dig the acorns out again. This led to a fight and I lost easily. Picking up my acorns I attempted to fight my way through the crowd of children. An old man who swept the streets for a living and who spoke in what I discovered later in life was a Cambridgeshire dialect, asked what was wrong. I explained as best I could. The old fellow looked slowly up and down the street and then as he poked his walking-stick in one of the cracks of the kerb-stones said :

“Take the acorns back, sonny, take them back.”

I was not prepared to do that and said so.

“Sonny,” he said, “this is the wrong place for them, take them all back and plant them in the wood, will you ? ” As he said this he pushed

some coppers in my hand. I thought he was about the funniest person I had ever met. He made me promise to plant every one of the acorns in a place where each would have a chance to grow, and the next morning I faithfully carried out my promise to him, wondering all the time what he meant by saying the street was the wrong place. I know now that he was looking at things from the countryman's point of view and I was looking from the point of view of the townsman.

When I think of the miserable winters spent in the colliery villages I always marvel at the way in which the people of the pits have retained their love of nature. To the visitors from the country the older mining villages must seem to be terrible places ; in many ways they are terrible too. The long rows of houses with their slated roofs, the miserable little patched-up lean-tos, the black puddles and the ever-present noises from the pit-bank can be most depressing if one thinks about them. I believe that I did much more crying in my young days than most children, but because of that I was also cheered by very small things which other children never seemed to notice.

Behind our row at one time there was a piece of waste land which was used as a dumping place for street sweepings. One day I found a bulb among the dust and rubbish. The other

children said it was an onion, but I thought differently, and seeking out an old salmon tin I carefully planted the bulb in it. I placed it in the back-yard well out of the reach of anyone and waited for it to grow. Every day I examined it for signs of life, but it never altered its appearance for a long time. I began to despair. The children in the row pulled my leg mercilessly, swearing that it was an onion I had planted. For a few days I forgot to look at it, having been interested in something else. Then one wet, dismal afternoon I lifted the salmon tin down and discovered two tiny green shoots on the bulb. I nearly went mad. My playmates still maintained that it was an onion, and I had to resort to violence frequently in order to convince them of their mistake. Slowly the shoots grew and a bud appeared. Every day I examined it, wondering what kind of flower it would be. Early one morning just before school-time I lifted it down to find that the bud had burst open into a marvellous white flower. I forgot about school and everything else as I sat there fascinated by this wonder. I had grown it myself. It would be impossible for me to describe the feelings of that morning. Out of the dust-heap I had found a flower. I know now that it was a miserable object, stunted and soiled by the grime of the back-yard, but to me it was wonderful. I wanted to write poetry about it, but I did not know

enough beautiful words. When I returned to earth it was much too late for school. At school in the afternoon session I was called upon by the teacher to explain my absence from morning school. I tried to tell him about my white flower and he thought I was trying to be clever. He caned me before the whole class. Next day I brought my flower complete with the tin in order to convince him, and as I placed it on his desk he looked at me in the strangest manner. I prepared for another caning, furtively wiping my hands on the back of my trousers. Suddenly his eyes filled with tears. "Go to your seat," he said quietly. I went, glad to escape the caning, and as I turned towards my desk I reached for the precious flower. "Will you leave it on my desk?" the teacher asked.

"Yes, sir," I said, not daring to say anything else. For the rest of the day my flower reposed upon the teacher's desk in the salmon tin with its gaudy paper band showing a juicy-looking steak of salmon to the rest of the class.

After that incident I was given the job of looking after the school plants, and never once did that teacher cane me for any reason.

I do not think I can be likened to certain writers who seem to be able to go off into hysterics at the sight of a flower, but my first attempt at growing a real flower lies in my mind as one of the most wonderful incidents of my life.

CHAPTER III

BRACKEN AND BUSH

I HOPE that I am not giving the impression of having spent a childhood of sheer misery, for nothing would be further from the truth. In the days when peace reigned in the mines and food was plentiful there were many things which helped to soften the memories of the strikes ; the kindness of some of the school teachers (the only grown-ups who seemed to be at all reliable) and who knew such wonderful things about books and trees and flowers—three never-failing attractions to me—the exciting games we played in the school playground and the long, long days of the summer holidays spent in the forest.

Ever since I can remember I have loved Sherwood. For miles and miles the forest stretches, beginning within half a mile of my own home. I never grew tired of it as a child, and now that I am grown to manhood I love it still more, if that is possible. Before I was old enough for school my parents had constantly to keep watch on me because of my habit of disappearing up the hill to the woods the minute that they turned their backs. At the first opportunity I would be

off up the road, pointing (so my mother has often said) like a collier's whippet. The road ran straight from the end of the houses to the woods, and the grown-ups could see me scuttling up it. As it was a good half-mile in length they very often caught me before I could get into the bracken and bushes, and I would be carried back squirming and yelling. One day, however, I crept under the gate of the first field, and to my delight I discovered that I could travel all the way to the woods on the grass and at the same time be hidden by the hedgerow from those who always seemed to be chasing me when I wanted to go there. For hours I would be wandering in the bracken that stood well above my head whilst the neighbours frantically searched for me. It was some time before they discovered how I managed to disappear so quickly. I crawled under the gate one day in a mighty hurry and my jersey caught fast on the gate bottom. There I had to lie until they came along seeking for me. The fear of being caught before I reached the woods was so strong that, foolish as it may seem, I feel that I want to run whenever I feel grass under my feet, even to this day.

I never could understand why grown-ups should get so alarmed about it. There was nothing to hurt little boys in Sherwood, and anybody could find their way out. They used to tell me that one day I would get lost and never find

my way out again ; perhaps I would be eaten by wild animals, and serve me right too.

Did they think that I believed that ? Of course, I knew all about the *thing* that lived in the den under the dark yews, but he wasn't very brave really ; I knew that if you went into his den you must never turn your back to him. I only turned my back to his den once, and that was just what he was waiting for. There's only one thing to do when the *thing* gets behind you—*run*. I ran—and I could hear his claws scattering the leaves behind me as I ran. Right down the path I went, through the brambles, under the bushes, at break-neck speed until with a final spurt I threw myself through the hedgerow into the green lane. I carried the scratches made by his claws on my legs for days afterwards. I never managed to make those at home believe that I had had such a narrow escape from the *thing*. They said, with that strange inconsistency that all grown-ups seemed to show, that there wasn't any *thing* in the forest and that it was the brambles that had scratched me.

Why, then, did they tell me that there was a *thing* ? I had often asked them to go with me to the woods, but they never seemed to like to go. I decided that they were frightened because they didn't know how to tackle him. I went to his den many times after that, but always I backed out, keeping my face towards him, and he never

dared even to show his face, although I sometimes heard his feet rustle the leaves in the darkest corners.

When I was at school we had a teacher who used to give pennies to the boys who could name the most of the leaves which he (the teacher) had gathered in his week-end walks. He said he was a nature-lover. I am afraid I always felt he was a liar. He didn't thrash his wife to show the people next door that he liked her ; he didn't kick his fox-terrier to prove his fondness for dogs. Why, then, did he break branches from the trees if he loved them ? I never won any pennies at school, but I often apologised to every kind of tree from which he had broken the sprays. They were all old friends of mine. Did the man really believe that I didn't know the difference between the lovely green young beech leaf, that always looked as if it might be good to eat, and the long chestnut leaf that had the funny little spikes on its edges that were never any good because they never turned stiff and sharp like the holly spikes ? He used to tell us that he had lived for many years in Epping Forest. Poor Epping Forest ! What a sigh of relief must have gone up from the dainty silver birch, what a grunt of satisfaction from the old oak, what a tremendous prayer of thanksgiving from the quivering aspen, on the day he he left to display to the admiring townsfolk in another part of the world his love of nature !

In the restricted conditions of mining life I could never have travelled had not Sherwood taught me. I have never seen the real sea in my life. But I have rounded the Horn many times, with the trade winds singing in the rigging above my head. I have lain becalmed in the Doldrums for hours in the heat of a July afternoon, and no pirate ever met with such adventures as I had. My masts were the tall beeches that no wind, however fierce, could carry away ; my sails, the green branches far above my head that needed no furling or reefing ; my deck, the mossy earth that was always steady in the worst of storms. The stout ship that Sherwood made for me never failed me, no matter how hard I pushed her before the wind.

How well I remember first discovering the lines:

“ Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm green shores.”

Dipping through the Tropics ! On a hot July afternoon with the wind souging in the trees. Lovely word, souging—it’s just what the wind does. If I die before I ever see the real sea I can say that I have gone “ dipping through the Tropics.” But the cargoes I carried home were different from those of the stately Spanish galleon or the quinquere of Nineveh. My hold was packed to the hatches with the oddest assortment of goods—boxes of new boots that had no heavy

hobnails in them, boots that were soft and light, and didn't hurt my heels ; thousands of pots of black-currant jam, because I had seldom tasted black-currant jam ; thousands of young trees with which I could fill up the gaps that the woodmen made in the forest. A real Indian wigwam, a bow and arrows, a knife with two blades, bottles of cough cure for my brother (who very often had to lay up for days coughing because Mother hadn't got the sixpence to buy him the cough cure !), and a new pit belt for Dad, a soft one with no buckle ; I always included that in the cargo, and it always had to be one with no buckle. I had very good reasons for bringing home that particular commodity.

So it was not surprising that I used to hurry home from school, gobble my food, or if it was only bread and dripping (which it mostly was), wrap it in newspaper and race off to the woods. There is something about trees that it is difficult to put into words. When one hurries from the houses and suddenly steps into the shade of the great beeches there seems to fall a sudden peace on the mind. I always felt that I wanted to whisper if anyone was with me, and I have noticed that many people who do not profess to have any great love for the forest have unconsciously lowered their voices as they walked beneath the trees. I have often read books in which the writers have described the forest as

being like a cathedral. I have only been in one cathedral in my life and—I wanted to whisper. During the holidays I used to build a kind of hut under a yew tree, using dead branches and bracken. In order to make it waterproof I would pile on the top heap after heap of bracken which also succeeded in making it light-proof as well. I used to like to lie in the darkness for a long time and then suddenly rush out into the sunshine. The sudden change from blackness to light made everything so clear and beautiful to my eyes, like taking a photograph, I used to think. Then when I was in school or had to stay at home I would close my eyes for a time, suddenly open them, and I would get a brief glimpse of my forest. One day, however, the teacher saw me playing this most interesting and delightful game. I realised that it was useless to try to explain, even to teachers, and the rest of the class became greatly amused at my stumbling explanations which only annoyed the teacher more than ever.

I was nicknamed “Blinker” for a long time after that ; but as I thought I had made some sort of a discovery that nobody else had ever made the nickname didn’t bother me very much and I decided that they must all be daft. Daft was a word much in use at that time among the mining fraternity and covered almost every degree of contemptuous abuse.

Another thing that I discovered about the same time was that after a day in the woods the the scent of the bracken and leaves would cling to my clothes. If I pushed my nose down into my jersey the faint forest scent made me see pictures. The teacher caught me doing that, too, and I think that after that she regarded me as mentally deficient.

Sometimes all the class would be taken for a walk through the woods. How I hated those walks. Thirty or forty children all pulling up *my* flowers, treading down *my* bracken, and I had to be there whilst they did it. I managed to save some of the flowers from their hands, however, in a rather unfair way. Somebody told me one day that if one pulled the tiny flowers of the "Blue Veronica" (birds'-eyes we children called it), then all the birds of the forest would fly down and peck out one's eyes. They also said that if one pulled the flower of the hemlock one's mother would die. I didn't believe the stories at all ; but after I had impressively related to the children in the playground grim stories of children without eyes and dead mothers, my blue veronica and hemlock were left in peace.

Sometimes the woodmen came near my favourite spot to cut down the trees which they had previously marked. They used to paint numbers on the trees and I remember spending all one afternoon trying to wash the numbers off with

water scooped out of the hollows that form at the bottom of beech trees. I thought that if I managed to get the paint off the woodmen might go away without cutting any trees down. I never managed to save any of them.

The other children used to beg for a ride on the drays when the men were taking the trees away. I never wanted a ride. It always seemed to me like a funeral with the poor dead body of the tree lying stiff behind the horses. Why did they always seem to cut more trees down in the spring, just when the leaves were young and tender? I used to keep away from the spot where they had been felling for weeks. The smashed branches, the tree-stumps and the deep ruts in the ground all combined to make as miserable a scene as ever I could imagine. Nothing to my mind is so desolate as a wood where felling has been in progress.

I hadn't a very good opinion about grown-up people. They didn't seem to do anything that I wanted them to do and they always seemed to be spoiling something for no reason at all, so far as I could see. Once somebody gave me two white rabbits and I kept them in a box in the back-yard. I liked them because they were like those that I had seen so often in the forest, except that they were white and had pink eyes. I kept them for a long time and each day I would make a journey to the fields for green

stuff for them. A strike was in progress at the time and things were pretty bad at home ; but caring for the rabbits seemed to help me to forget about being hungry. I took a delight in scouring the fields and woods for the nicest things with which to feed them. One day I hurried home with a bag full of choice bits for them and they had gone. They had been sold for money to buy food. There had been no hint of such a thing, no suggestion that they ought to be sold. I shall never forget the awful grief of that day. I had never owned anything like that before. I was so upset that without realising what I was doing I went right back to the fields to take the stuff back.

Another time I found a sparrow ; it had hurt a wing and was unable to fly. Remembering the fate of my rabbits, I thought it best to keep the sparrow where it wouldn't be seen. The spot I chose was the bottom of a cupboard in the front parlour. I kept it several days, feeding it on nothing but bread. I didn't think that it would eat anything else. One day I found it dead. I was certain that the grown-ups had found it during my absence and deliberately killed it. As I have said, I hadn't a very good opinion about grown-up people.

The youths who worked in the pits and who lived in the streets near my home made a great favourite of me about this time. I never knew

why they always made such a fuss of me. They were a rough lot, indeed, they were regarded as hooligans by the people in the town ; always fighting, swearing, and getting into trouble with the police. Yet they were never rough with me. They would take me miles perched on the crossbars of their bikes, or rambling in the woods. I can remember two of them actually falling out over which bike I was to ride on. They used to give me a stick just like theirs, with fancy rings carved all round it like a barber's pole, but not so big, and I was expected to walk as far as they did on the outward journey : but I was hoisted on to each one's back in turn on the return journey. Consequently I came to know Sherwood better than most grown people whilst I was still a child.

My mother was greatly troubled about this because the " Corner Boys " as they were called had fearful reputations for swearing and all kinds of bad behaviour, but had she known them she need not have bothered. " Nar then," they would say if someone let a bad word slip out, " can't tha see this kid ? " Yet I know that when I wasn't present their language was plentifully besprinkled with the vilest of words as is often the case with pit boys. They said I was a funny kid because I always wanted them to go to the woods ; but they would always take me when I asked. I have much to thank

the "Corner Boys" for. To the townsfolk and the police they were just hooligans who had to be put down with a strong hand. To me they were wonderful men with an amazing knowledge of the secrets of Sherwood, and the possessors of what beneath their roughness was seldom suspected, hearts of pure gold.

One Christmas the street corner was strangely quiet. No "Corner Boys" yelled out the latest pantomime songs. They never did sing at the street corner again. It was the Christmas of nineteen-fourteen. Only a few odd ones came back and they did not sing. The rest remained in France.

Through the days of the War I was lonely. Other children never cared much about going to the forest, and I hated to stay in the streets. Although I was proud of the fact that my friends the "Corner Boys" were fighting for England, I was sorely puzzled as to why it should be necessary to fight Germans. I was always hearing of terrible atrocities committed by German soldiers; but I had seen in my school books beautiful pictures of the Black Forest in Germany, and I could not believe that anybody who lived in a country like that could possibly be as bad as the Germans were supposed to be. There was a big camp near the town and I thought that if anyone could satisfy me about it all, it would be a soldier. I waited for an opportunity to ask

about it. One day I saw a big Canadian sitting on the fence by the wood side and, after some preliminary skirmishing, I asked him point-blank if the Germans really did do such things. "Well," said he, "I don't reckon they are any worse than our chaps." That settled the matter once and for all in my mind, because, as I reasoned it out, the "Corner Boys" who were the only soldiers I knew wouldn't do such things. Alas for my reasoning as a child. I know now that there is nothing to which men will not stoop when they are at war.

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CHAPTER IV

CHILDREN'S TOYS

THERE were two days in the week which I always dreaded—Friday which is the pay-day at the pit, and Sunday. Father would come home from the pit on Friday thick with coal dust, clothes sodden with sweat, slump down into a chair, all the grand strength of which I was so proud and of which I used to boast to other children, drained from him. At the same time he would throw his wages on the table with a “That’s all there is this week, lass.” Always it was the same remark, as if *that* was all this week ; but it might be more next. It never was more the next week. Then Mother, without picking it up, would say : “Whatever am I going to do with it ?” I used to want to run out of the house before he threw the money down, because I was terrified of the hopeless look on the faces of both of them ; but I always stayed hoping to hear him say : “A bit more this week.” He never did though. I wondered why he didn’t go to work somewhere else. He could tell me the most astonishing things about other countries, he knew all about books, and

people, and something called "politics" which I used to hear him talking to other men about, and so I knew he was awfully clever. Why then did he keep going to the pit if they wouldn't pay him enough money? I always arrived at the same conclusion. It was no good expecting grown-ups to do anything that I wanted them to do.

On Sunday I was imprisoned for the day. It was a disgrace if one was seen out on Sunday with one's week-day clothes on, and as I had no Sunday suit I had to stay indoors. I used to pretend to the other children that I didn't like to go out on Sundays. Once Dad had a stroke of luck and I actually had a Sunday suit. I started to go to Sunday school. After a few weeks it became necessary to wear the suit during the week. The Sunday school teacher, a dear old lady, had noticed that I was becoming shabbier each Sunday. Trying to be kind, she said: "It doesn't matter about Sunday clothes here," but she said it before the whole class. Even kind old ladies weren't to be trusted, I thought. I asked for permission to go to the lavatory and once outside I ran home. I never went to Sunday school again.

My parents could never keep pace with me in boot leather (and I always seemed to be wanting new boots). Once my boots became so bad that I searched among the old boots which were

always saved in a cupboard. I found a fairly decent left boot and, as it was my right boot which was the worst, I squeezed my right foot into the left boot which I had found. I went to school with two left boots on. I could only walk very slowly because of the pain and when other children asked me to play I pretended that I had hurt my ankle.

I carried on like this for a few days until during playtime at the school one day a bright boy "twigged" my two left boots and made it his business to tell the rest of the school. There I stood by the side of the school wall, and it seemed that every single child in the yard screamed at the top of his voice: "He's got two left boots on." I became blind with hatred and rage. Such hatred would have been unnatural in a man, let alone a child of school age. I ran at my tormentors, forgetting my two left boots, and fell in a heap on the floor. I cannot remember what happened after that.

They nicknamed me "Lefty" for a time; but once I had obtained a proper pair of boots I soon cured them of that. The "Corner Boys" had taught me how to fight, and there were few in the school who could call me "Lefty" and get away with it.

I had one never-failing consolation when things became almost unbearable—the forest. What did it matter? I used to think once I had

reached the woods. They didn't know the things that I knew about the forest. Not even the school teachers could find the things I could. The children would be yelling for their mothers if they went in the depths of the woods as I did. Some day I would take two or three of them with me and when I had got them into the thickest part of the forest I would pretend that I was lost. Then what would they do? I could bet the teachers would have to ask me to show them the way out if they went right in. I made up my mind that when I was a man I would build a little house right in the middle of the forest and I would never come out again. It is still my ambition to own a house in a wood.

In the autumn I was in my glory. Nobody could produce such marvellous chestnuts or "conkers" as I. I used to feel terribly sorry for the children who timidly picked the small nuts that fell from the trees near the edge of the woods. Sometimes they would ask me to show them where I got the big ones from; but that was asking too much. I would put them off by giving them a few of mine. When I was hungry (which was very often) I used to experiment with different things in the forest to see which were good to eat. Chestnuts, blackberries, raspberries and things like that of course were very good; but I found lots of other things that were eatable, and some that weren't so good. The berries of the haw

thorn could be eaten if one was hungry enough ; but not those of the wild rose. Crab-apples were quite good when you got used to the sourness. Acorns could be got down at a pinch, although they didn't taste very nice, and the young shoots of the blackberry bramble were all right if you peeled the skin off. Then there was the leaf of the hawthorn and some kind of plant that grew in the fields ; it had little red specks on the leaves and had a pleasantly acid taste.

All these things had special names that the teachers didn't know. Hawthorn berries were "Cataigs" (goodness knows why), hawthorn leaves were "Bread and cheese." The young bramble shoots became "Butterscotch," and the plant with the red specks on the leaves, whose name I never knew, I called "Gobblety-guts." I used to eat enormous quantities of "Gobblety-guts." Perhaps that is why it had such a peculiar name.

I read in a penny dreadful that out in the wilds of Alaska or some such place, men would store food, tools, etc., in certain places which they called "caches." I decided that I must have a "cache" or two, and all over the woods I had little hiding places for things, in the bole of a rotted silver birch, or at the bottom of a particular beech tree. I had no food or tools to hide, but I had an astonishing collection of bits of string, pieces of wire, bottles, cigarette cards, marbles

and goodness knows what else. I took a great delight in walking unerringly to the places where these things were hid. Thus I learned to note the things of the forest that others so often pass without a glance. The peculiar shape of a tree, the presence of an unusual plant, the new rabbit burrow, and so on. As I had no books to tell me the names of things, I had names of my own. The yew tree was the bogy tree because of a mysterious *thing* which lived in the darkness under one of them. A certain kind of blackbird which laid a differently coloured egg to other blackbirds became a "French" or "foreign" blackbird. The young bird without feathers was a "bare-bub" and when it grew feathers and left the parent nest it had "ship-fligged." Sometimes I found nests which other children had pulled to pieces—they had "yagged" them, and if I met the "yaggers" I would "bosh" them. That is, hit the front of their caps so that if they had any eggs hidden there they would be broken.

The forest was an enthralling place to me. Everything that was decent and fine in my early life seemed to come from it. It was the one place where I had the advantage over grown-ups and children alike. I laughed for days after hearing the teacher talk about "lady-birds." I thought that anybody ought to know that the proper name was "cow-ladies."

It was seldom that I had any money to spend. An odd penny for running on an errand for a neighbour was the most I had. There was a small shop at the bottom of our street in which, a few months before Christmas, there would be a wonderful collection of children's toys. Once there was a magic lantern with half a dozen slides. I wasn't greatly struck with it until I found out that the slides had on them pictures that were supposed to be views of the English country-side. Just the thing for the long winter nights when it was dark long before I could get from the school to the woods. It said on the price ticket : " One penny per week for twelve weeks." That looked easy enough, I thought.

With unbounded optimism I paid my first penny and received a little green card on which my payments were to be marked. It took sixteen weeks to pay the twelve pennies. I was tormented by the fear that the woman in the shop would sell it because I was so long in paying the money. She assured me, however, that she would keep it for me, and I thought she was about the best grown-up person that I knew. One never-to-be-forgotten Saturday afternoon I raced down to the shop with the final penny. As the woman wrapped the lantern up she said : " I have picked some lovely slides for you."

I rushed home nearly mad with pleasure, drew down the window blind which was to be the

screen, lit the little oil lamp in the back of the lantern and put in the first slide. On the screen appeared a picture of a soldier in a scarlet coat and big bushy hat saying good-bye to his wife and children. The rest of the pictures depicted his adventures in the war until finally he returned to his family (still in his scarlet coat and bushy hat) the proud possessor of an enormous medal and a wooden leg. I was never so disgusted in my life.

I never forgave the woman in the shop. I thought that she had deliberately done me down. For a long time after that I hated all grown-ups and every morning as I went to school I used to spit on that shop window. It was the only thing I could think of to pay her back.

This fear and distrust of grown-ups persisted for a long time in my mind. Children weren't much good either, because if I took them with me into my forest they were never happy unless they were pulling flowers or smashing trees. I used to feel actual pain if I saw a branch broken from a tree, as if somebody had broken one of my fingers or an arm, and would scream with rage and pain. I was cordially disliked by most of the children because of this and I think they regarded me as being a bit soft. So I crept more and more into my shell, finding my happiness in the forest, in the cool greenness of the beech, England's most beautiful tree, in the

sough of the wind in the high branches and the rank, yet strangely attractive, scent of the bracken.

Hour after hour, day after day, I would lie in the depths of the forest. All the troubles and pain of the hours that I was forced to spend in the town would be far away. It wasn't me that lived down there in the town at all. I felt that I had left my body. I would soar over the tree-tops, visiting all the lovely spots that I knew. Every little detail of those places I knew, and saw quite clearly—the bank where I first saw a squirrel on the ground and was convinced that it was a little monkey, the corner of a copse where I found the celandines (wood buttercups I called them) and the place, deep in the brambles, where I once found a nest of young birds inside an old bucket. That bucket was a puzzle to me for a long time. It had no bottom in it and there it was buried in the brambles half a mile from the road. How did it get there? Whoever would want to carry an old bucket without a bottom right into the wood and then push it deep into the undergrowth? I amused myself for hours making up stories about that bucket and the reason for its presence in the forest; but they never seemed very convincing.

There was plenty of happiness in my childhood once I was away from the town. Plenty of fun and adventure. My dreams and fancies were all the more beautiful because of the forest. I have much to thank her for.

CHAPTER V

THE SONS OF MARTHA

AT school there was one thing in which I excelled—reading. I was always the top boy of the class in reading. When nothing else was available I would even read the arithmetic book and get a certain amount of pleasure out of the problems set out in it. I was not interested in solving the problems, I was never any good at figures ; but the kind of sum in which a man had a horse and rode a certain distance, or a ship sailed at a certain speed, always interested me. I liked to picture the horse, or the ship on the sea. This hunger for books caused me a good deal of trouble at various times during my school-days. Nothing was too trivial and nothing too great for me to read. So long as it referred to people or animals or my forest it would do for me. There were few books in our school and I had very soon read them all. Newspapers, penny dreadfuls, pamphlets of any kind, fairy tales, anything at all became grist to my mill. I had read the Bible through and through at a very early age, because that and a novel entitled *The Queen's Necklace*, by Dumas, I think, were

the only books to be found in my home. The desire to read became almost an obsession with me. In the market-square there stood, on Saturday nights, a second-hand bookstall. I haunted it. Of course I had no money to buy books ; but I could pretend that I was considering buying one, and so read odd pages standing at the stall. I used to feel an almost overwhelming impulse to steal books whenever I saw them, and to this day I often feel the same way. I knew better than to do so, however. My parents, in spite of their poverty, had taught me to be honest above all things. The man who worked in the Public Library, I thought, must be the happiest man in the world with all those books around him.

As a result of my reading constantly, and partly, I suppose, because of under-nourishment, I began to suffer from nerves. I developed a habit of twitching my shoulders and screwing up my face. My eyes became weak and my health poor generally. For a time my parents kept all reading matter away from me. That made things worse. I began to collect old newspapers as I was going to the woods. Some of the papers had been used as wrappings for fish and chips and would be soaked with grease ; but so long as I could make out the printing I did not mind the smell. If I could find a piece of paper with the " In Memoriam " column on it I was delighted. The

bits of poetry pleased me greatly and I would read them over and over. Sometimes there would be a piece that I thought was not very good and I would think out a better one ; or rather what I considered was a better one.

One of my brothers obtained from somewhere a selection of Kipling's poems. I managed to get it from him. The poem, "The Sons of Martha," impressed me greatly and I began to think about things which up to that time had never bothered me. My poor clothes, my hunger, and particularly my lack of books, made me think that I must be one of the sons of Martha. I began to notice the difference in appearance between the children whose parents did not depend on the pit for a living and those whose fathers worked in the pit. I had the difference brought home to me one day in a crushing way. The school which I attended was a "Church School" and frequently a clergyman would attend the school to give us Scripture lessons. As I was unable to attend Sunday school I always looked forward to his coming. He told us one day how we were all equal in the sight of God, no matter what our worldly wealth might be, and when he finished I was really happy.

Immediately after he had departed the Headmaster came into the class-room. He said : "As we have too many boys at this school we have found it necessary to transfer a number to the

Council School ; will the following boys stand up ? ” He proceeded to read out the names of several boys, mine included. I didn’t mind going to a fresh school at all because as I stood up it flashed across my mind that there would be a lot of different books to read. Then as I looked round the room to see who was to go with me I realised that the shabbiest boys in the class had been deliberately selected—none of the sons of Martha had to go to the Council School I thought, and the parson had just said we were all equal.

I knew why I had to leave. Because I did not go to Sunday school. Because I was shabby. Because my Dad worked in the pit. Because I was not as good as the other children. The colour must have left my face as I stood before the class because the Headmaster asked me if I was ill. I muttered something about being a son of Martha and—“ I didn’t care ! ” Then I burst out : “ My Dad is stronger than any of theirs, he works hard and they won’t pay him, and I know all about the woods.” I tried to say so many things, all at once, that the words became all mixed up. I think the teacher understood something of what was going on in my mind, for when the class had ceased giggling and I had quietened down, he said gently : “ Don’t you want to leave this school ? ” “ Yes,” I said, and I meant it.

So once again I sought refuge in my beloved woods, and my bits of poetry on fish-and-chip

papers, and my Kipling poems. I was quite happy again in a very short time. I learned how to make my own happiness inventing stories about the things of the forest, and trying to write poetry like Kipling ; but I could never get more than two lines to rhyme properly. My feeling of fear and distrust of people began to change. Gradually I began to feel sorry for them because they never saw the lovely things that I saw. Sometimes I took children with me to the woods and tried to tell them of the exciting things that could be found there. Occasionally they would be as excited and interested as myself and we would have wonderful times together, but after a time I would long for silence and my own thoughts and I would quietly disappear into the green towards my favourite spot.

One beautiful May morning I made my first journey into a new world. A world of which I had heard much, and because of which I had suffered much—the pit.

Only three days before I had been at school, but even then I had been booked for the pit. I had no choice in the matter at all. It had always been an understood thing that I should go there eventually. “When you start work at the pit you will be able to have them,” had always been the answer to my requests for books or clothes.

As I started off towards the pit headgear I was filled with a strange mixture of fear and happiness.

Happiness because of the prospect of being able to buy books with the shilling pocket-money which I was to receive each week-end, and fear because of the things that I knew of the pit. Fear of returning one day as I had seen so many return, smashed, crippled, dead, and once—most fearful of all—*blind*.

He was a young man, nineteen years of age, tall, broad, strong as a bull, and merry as only a healthy young giant knows how to be. He kept racing pigeons which he loosed himself and I used to sit with him in the back-yard where he had his pigeon cote. As the birds flew overhead he would tell me their names, for he could distinguish each one as clearly on the wing as in the cote. "See that little brown 'un?" he would say, "ar reckon ar can win't big race w' it." He loved those birds, and his big hands could be wonderfully gentle with them. He had brown eyes that shone as he tilted his head back to watch his birds pass over, and a chuckling laugh that always set everybody else laughing. One day as he worked at the coal face there was a tearing, crackling sound, and he received the full force of the bursting coal in his brown eyes. . . . They brought him home blind and half-mad, raving about his pigeons. He doesn't keep pigeons now.

All these things passed through my mind as with my eyes puffed from lack of sleep, my four slices of bread and dripping stuffed in the front

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All these things passed through my mind as with my eyes puffed from lack of sleep, my four slices of bread and dripping stuffed in the front

of my shirt, wrapped in newspaper, and my heels rubbing themselves raw inside the big hobnailed boots, I trudged along the pit road.

Always I had feared the pit. It was because of the pit that I had been hungry so often. It was because of the pit that I had never had proper clothes and boots. It was the pit that blinded Jim. Yet I was going there because it was the only way in which I might obtain the books that I craved for. An awful fear that I might be blinded like Jim took hold of me. What use would books be to me then? How would I be able to go to the forest?

The scent of the May-bloom in the hedgerow tempted me to linger, or to climb the fence and race across the fields to my forest. I wondered what excuse I could offer for not going to the pit; but I knew that there is no excuse good enough to justify shirking the pit when there is need at home. As I stood on the pit-bank awaiting my turn to step into the great slimy iron cage that appeared at intervals out of the reeking blackness of the pit shaft bearing its load of black sweat-sodden men, I was sure that I should never come out again. The fear inside me changed into a dead feeling of resignation as I stepped on to the cage along with forty other men and lads; but as we suddenly dropped into the blackness all the pent-up fear of the pit that had been inside me since I was a tiny child seemed to

spring to life at once. The shrieking conducting ropes that banged and clattered on the side of the cage, the rushing air, the sickening smell of the pit, a mixture of sweat, horses, tobacco and oil, served to create in me a terror such as words could never describe.

When I think of the countless boys who have experienced that same terror, I pray that some day a wise government will decide that boys shall not work in the pits, for mining is a man's job. When I first entered the pit I must have been a strange lad. My fear of the pit, my distrust of grown-up people, and my love of solitude, held me aloof from my mates for a time. Gradually, however, I began to see clearly, things which hitherto I had only obtained fleeting glimpses of, and the world of the pit became indeed a new world. Under the harshness of the pit I discovered a comradeship and kindness such as is rare in this world. Under the foulness I found a cleanliness of mind, and a lightness of heart which, devoid as it was of any religious influence, would put to shame much of the so-called Christianity of the world. I found men, whilst they cursed me for a "weak-backed kid," helped me to push or lift my tubs of coal because the job was too much for me, and who, on Fridays, gave me sixpence or a shilling tip, telling me the while in lurid language that I was the worst lad they had ever seen in the pit; "but," they

would say, "tha'll soon get used to it owd lad, an' tha'll be alreight."

In spite of my fears, which have never left me, I became interested in the pit. I began to sweat and struggle as the men did. It was a point of honour with me that I should do my best for them. They could be harsh, sometimes they even seemed cruel, but they taught me to work, to do a job properly and take a pride in it. They taught me that idleness is unforgivable and that I had feet of my own on which to stand.

"See this junction?" said an old stoneman one day as I was walking with him from the pit bottom to the place where we worked. "Me and Jack So-and-so did all that girdering work." He held up his lamp so that I could see it properly and the pride glowed in his blue-scarred face as he said: "Fifteen years it's stood, an' it's niver budged an inch." "Did you get good money for it?" I asked. "Naw," said he, "wi were on't 'mini' (minimum wage)." "Fifteen years," he repeated as we went on, "an' it's niver budged." As there was no "minimum wage" at that time I have often wondered how much he and his mate received for that work. All that he thought of was the fact that it had been well done.

I learned too to appreciate the grim humour of the pits. Humour that the outsider often mistakes for harshness and consequently comes to

regard the collier as something almost inhuman. I remember once being packed in the cage along with the usual "ran" of forty-odd men, several of whom were officials and who, because of the fact that they were rather fat (a rare thing in the pits) were often the butt of sly, but quite good-natured jokes. They, being pit-men, took the jokes in an equally good-natured way. This day, just as the props had been withdrawn, and we hung suspended on the thin rope over the shaft half a mile in depth, a wiry little collier, glancing at the fat men surrounding him, remarked in a voice that all could hear : " Lord ! wouldn't there be a splash in't pit bottom if't rope broke." Everybody howled with laughter, fat men included. Yet the breaking of a winding rope and the crashings of a cage-load of men into the pit sump is an awful thing to contemplate. The cream of the joke was that the little wiry collier was in the same cage. The outsider may see little to laugh about in such grim humour, yet if the miner ever lost this ability of being able to laugh in the face of the dangers that are his daily lot there would be precious little coal mined.

I learned early in my pit life to laugh at misfortune too. I crushed a finger rather badly between two tubs of coal and I ran, terrified at the sight of so much blood, to the nearest collier. " Shurrup," he said, " tha'll be alreight in a minute or two." Then as he carefully cleaned

and bandaged the finger he said with a twinkle in his eye : " Wot's tha shartin' about ? Tha's got nine more wot ain't trapped."

Since then I have seen men laugh as they have been carried out of the pit with terrible injuries. I have seen men laugh as they have been carried out never to return, and I have learned that men don't laugh like that unless they have within them a spirit that is far above pits and coal and wages. A spirit that, although they may not know it, is of Christ Himself.

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CHAPTER VI

REALMS OF GOLD

I PERSEVERED with my reading and my attempts to write poetry. Every night I would hurry home from the pit and get out my books and pens, sometimes being so eager to try out an idea that had struck me whilst at work that I would only wash my hands, leaving the grime on my face for hours. I would often be still reading or writing when my father, who was on the opposite shift, rose to go to work in the morning.

This caused trouble, because I was using too much light and Mother couldn't afford the pennies for the meter. I had to save a few coppers out of my pocket money for that purpose and be satisfied with fewer books. I used to collect candle ends to use when I had no money, and have strained my eyes for hours trying to read by fire-light. Yet I believe that I learned more in those days than ever I would have done in a school.

My nights were my own. I read and wrote just as I wished and I was happy. I made great discoveries all by myself, discoveries that other

lads of my age had probably made years before, but I was tremendously happy to think that I had found them myself. Every new book was a fresh journey to me and I always had the feeling that I was going to find something wonderful too. I learned to chuckle at the puns of Thomas Hood, to wriggle with delight at the scathing satire of Byron (whose works I still love more than any) and to sink into the gloom with Poe. I learned how to see the man behind the book or poem, to detect the false and the true, and to enjoy the beauty and rhythm of words, even though I was incapable of writing anything of the kind. Somebody lent me a collection of the works of Charles Dickens and I made myself ill because I couldn't waste time in sleeping whilst I had those to read. His Mr. Micawber became my favourite character. I loved his weaknesses, his pompousness, and his kind heart hidden beneath. He was real: I knew men like him in the pit.

Sometimes I would fall asleep over my books and my brothers would delight in stealing my poems in order to recite them standing on a chair or the table. The poems were always the same, "Coal" rhyming with "soul," and "grim" with "dim," and although they always seemed very good at night, my brothers showed me how poor they were next morning.

During the week I would spend hours outside

the bookshops deciding which book to buy with my shilling pocket-money and gradually I built up an amazing collection. Musty old history books, old geography books with maps that were so old that they were all wrong, or seemed to be, poetry books with the pages all spotted with damp, books with hard backs, and books with no backs at all. I bought a box from a grocer's shop for fourpence and made a rough bookcase. Every week-end I made an addition to my "library" as I liked to call it, and hour after hour when I was free from the pit I would lie in Sherwood trying to understand my books. One week, owing to father having not worked because of an injury, I did not receive my shilling, and I was greatly upset because I had seen a copy of Tennyson's works on the second-hand bookstall in the market. Fearing that it would be sold I went to the old lady who kept the stall and begged her to save it for me. "Why," said the old lady, "it's only poetry. Wouldn't you sooner have some of these?" pointing to some weekly penny dreadfuls. I explained to her very seriously that poetry was *real* reading, and that she ought to start reading it: she would be surprised, I told her, how nice it really was. The old lady began to cackle in such a way that the people in the market-place turned and stared at us both. I felt the colour rise to my face and I longed to run away; but I wanted to be sure

about that book before I left. She kept on cackling, and I kept on waiting, and the people near the stall kept on staring too. Suddenly she stopped, looked at me intently over her spectacles and then started to waddle round to the front of the stall. I got ready to bolt, but she said quietly : " Is there anything else that you would like me to save ? " I pointed nervously to two more books. " Here you are then," she said, " and God bless you," at the same time pushing the books into my hands. I stood astonished for a few seconds, then realising that she was giving them to me without payment, I turned and raced through the crowds, forgetting even to thank her. Funny things, these grown-ups, I mused, but not so bad sometimes.

Then came a strike, and my books became everything to me. The characters in them were alive, and lived in the forest with me. I used to read long passages from them aloud, trying to pronounce the words properly because I loved the sound of them. The wind roaring in the branches was the beat of the sea on the shore, and I would read aloud that beautiful thing of Tennyson's :

" Break, Break, Break on thy cold grey stones, Oh sea
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me."

or in the dark when the forest was silent and the leaves were motionless as if wearied of dancing

to the wind, I would read in a whisper because the silence seemed too beautiful to break :

“ The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.”

The strike continued. The Union funds ran out. Bit by bit the furniture was sold, and clothes pawned. My younger brothers cried continually for more food and for weeks I was never free from the gnawing hunger pain.

One day I went to my bookcase and it was empty. My books had been sold for money to buy food. For a time I was stricken dumb. I ran to the woods sobbing and half-choking and fell face downwards in the bracken. Then I found words—all the foul words of the pit, words which I had never thought to use, poured from me in a black torrent of hatred, of the strike and those who caused it. I swore, using the same words over and over, until my voice sank into a gasp in my throat, and I slept.

When I awoke it was growing dark, and the woods were silent. As I lay with my face close to the ground, and the scent of leaves in my nostrils, I realised that I had still one thing left, that even strikes could not take away, and I was ashamed that I had insulted her with the language of the pit. I never swore in the woods again.

Besides I still had the memory of what I had read. I had definite ideas as to what my favourite poets must have looked like and if I saw any pictures of them that did not conform with the picture in my mind I frankly didn't believe them. Robert Burns was plump, with a round shiny face and scrubby hair, just like the man in the pit bottom tool shop, and he liked going for walks in the country, drinking beer, shouting waggish remarks to the girls, and talking loudly in the tap-room. He was secretly ashamed of his more beautiful poems and sometimes deliberately wrote coarse things because of it.

Edgar Allan Poe was dark and sallow, probably hunch-backed. He had a long face and the most beautiful eyes and could be ever so gentle.

Tennyson was tall and grey and very serious on the surface. He didn't always write what he thought though, and he probably wrote pretty little things secretly, showed them to children, and then burned the writing before he was found out.

Byron was good-looking, but soft and rather pasty. He was proud of his writings, and no doubt swanked a good deal ; but he was certainly entitled to swank, and I didn't blame him. He pretended not to care about anything that was said about him, and all the time he was tormented inside. He didn't care for children, and probably never even noticed them. He wouldn't be a bad

sort of a chap when you got to know him, and anyway—he certainly could write.

I have had to change my ideas about some of the men whose work has meant so much to me ; but those early impressions persistently return, and I find myself often picturing them just as I did when first I discovered the beauty of their writings.

It was always with the older writers that I loved to linger. I could make nothing of some of the moderns although I eagerly tried to understand. Here are what I consider to be the three most beautiful things that I ever discovered. First and foremost Gray's "Elegy," secondly, Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," and thirdly, Tennyson's "In Memoriam." It must be remembered that my choice of books was very limited, however, and that when I obtained a fresh one I would read it over and over until every word, every phrase became real, and full of meaning to me. Once I tried to read and understand the poems of D. H. Lawrence, who, I had been told, was the son of a miner, and came from a mining town not far from my own birthplace. To me his poems were just a meaningless jumble of words for the most part : but here and there flashes of beauty and brilliance showed like little bits of yellow quartz that one sometimes sees glistening in the coal face. Reading that kind of stuff made my head ache, but I

persevered until I came across a poem of Lawrence's all about "Mating Tortoises" or something. I gave it up after that. I am accustomed to obscene stories and filthy rhymes—one hears plenty of those in the pit—and, truth to tell, have been forced to laugh at the wit displayed in some of them. I have laughed at the stories of Rabelais whose works I once mortgaged three weeks' pocket money in order to read, because somebody told me it was a "classic," but the poems of Lawrence, possessing neither the wit of the pit rhymes, nor the boisterous humour of the French classic, made me feel sick.

There are plenty of modern writers whom I place in the same category. All tumbling over each other to write smut, because there is a market for it. I have longed to be a writer all my life. I have seen smut in plenty and could tell of it if I wished to do so. But if in order to have two decent suits instead of one, if in order to see the sea around the coast of England I must write smut, then I prefer to stay in this mining town for the rest of my life, and dream of the sea, and of good clothes and food. I prefer to stay as I am—on the Dole.

I am satisfied that I am able to read, understand and model my thoughts according to the ideas of those writers whose wonders I discovered in the forest by the green light under the trees,

in the pit by the yellow gleam of my pit lamp, or in the flickering light of my hoarded candle-ends at home.

Few of the modern writers, who have furiously discarded the old standards of morality and prosody, will, I am convinced, ever write anything that will live. Their poems seem to be rushing themselves to death. They don't help me to make pictures in my mind in the way that Gray does :

“ There scatter'd oft, the earliest of the year,
By hands unseen are showers of violets found.
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.”

or as Keats does in his “ Ode to Autumn ” :

“ Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness !
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun ;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run ;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees.”

Perhaps it's all old-fashioned, I don't know ; but it tells me of England and beauty. It has made me forget hunger, and loneliness and poverty. It has kept my mind free of class hatreds, and taught me to believe in God, and the future of my country. I don't suppose that the poets expected it to do any more than that.

CHAPTER VII

STRIKE

AT "snap" or meal-time in the pit, the men would sit talking of all kinds of subjects, and I loved to sit and listen. Politics, Religion, Trade Unionism, were all discussed, and at an age when most boys know little or nothing about such things, I had begun to think deeply about them. Occasionally I would ask questions ; but usually I would carry away in my mind all that had been said, and at home in bed, or under the trees of the forest, I would have tremendous arguments with myself. It seemed to me that if a man could talk enough he could be on the Union Committee, and I made up my mind that I, too, must learn to talk so that some day I could be a Committeeman and alter some of the things I thought were wrong.

As I grew older I began to take a delight in causing discussions on all kinds of things. Few of the youths of my own age took any interest in such matters and consequently I was usually to be found in the company of men much older than myself. I am afraid that I was very often a nuisance, and a lot too fond of hearing my

own voice. I had only to read half a dozen pages of some book that I had picked up and I would emerge with an absolutely infallible remedy for one of the troubles of the world. I would wait for an opportunity to have my say, and then with the greatest confidence and a tremendous spate of words I would coolly tell men, each one old enough to be my father, where they were wrong.

For a time I was allowed by the good-humoured men to go on like this, and I began to think I was a great fellow, but one snap-time in the pit, after I had held forth on the subject of religion for at least fifteen minutes, an old collier who seldom spoke, but always sat quietly listening, turned to me his blue-scarred face, and squirting a jet of tobacco juice from his mouth, shifted his chew into one side and said : " Does tha know wot ar think ? " " No," I answered encouragingly, " Wot ? " " Well," said he with devastating calmness, " Tha just oppens thi marth an' it sey wot it pleases." Then for ten minutes or so he went on in his slow, calm way smashing all my arguments one by one to the amusement of the other men and to my discomfiture. As we rose to resume work he turned to me and said quietly : " Nivver say nowt abart owt, unless tha's certain it's t'truth ; colliers 'ev enough ter put up wi' without wind-bags."

He taught me a lesson that I have never

forgotten. Too often eloquence is mistaken for cleverness, and no section of the workers of this country has suffered so much because of that mistake as the mining community.

As I learnt to listen I was amazed at the different ideas and opinions that prevailed on Unionism. It became clear to me that the great majority of the members looked upon the Union as a sort of insurance scheme, into which they paid their shillings in order that somebody else might think for them. For a time I became an ardent, but silent, Trade Unionist and eagerly read anything that I could get hold of that dealt with the subject. Then came a strike. The miners fought stubbornly for a long time until, urged by one or two of the more militant, they called a meeting with a view to withdrawing the pump-men and flooding the pit. Being a very militant young man and having no great love for the pit I heartily agreed with the idea. It wasn't my pit, anyway. The strange thing about it was that the men who had homes and families to think of were of the same opinion as myself, and voted almost unanimously for withdrawing the pump-men. Suddenly there jumped to his feet an old and well-liked minor official. "Don't be damned fools," he shouted passionately, "yer doan't know wot yer doin'." I remember thinking how ridiculously like a film it all was. He went on to point out how they

must all suffer if they did such a foolish thing, and ended by asking for the vote to be taken again. At the second time of asking everybody voted the other way. I was disgusted to think that grown men should be so easily swayed. I had come to the meeting to vote for the flooding of the pit, and I would vote that way. When the Chairman called for those in favour of the motion there was one solitary hand stuck up in the middle of the crowd—mine.

There was a good deal of laughter at my expense, and those who laughed had, only a few minutes before, been as determined as I was to let the pit flood. In later years that lesson came back to me. Men can often be made to follow a bad leader if he is eloquent enough. More, perhaps, than any other worker, the miner has need to choose his leaders carefully. He must find men who will not lead him into the toils of class-hatred and all their barren starving consequences. Better still, he must think more for himself.

There is something about the miners when they are on strike which one is forced to admire, no matter what one may think about the rights or wrongs of the strike. Can anyone think of the great strike of 1926, of the dogged determination of the men in the face of hunger and piling debts, debts that they knew would keep them poor for two or three years even if they

won, without some admiration? It is all very well to keep saying that they were misled, perhaps they were, and perhaps they knew it after the first three months. "Wot's the good of 'evving a Union if we doan't stand by it?" they would say. They had pledged their word and they were not going to back out. After the first nine days they were left to fight it out by themselves, and fight they did, as few others have fought in the industrial history of Great Britain.

They each had paid their weekly shillings so that somebody else might do the thinking for them, and the "thinkers" said "stay out." Of course it's foolish! But if you try to deny the courage of them I shall ask you to read your history books again.

It was in Sherwood again, during the great strike, that I made what seemed to me at that time a wonderful discovery. As I lay reading my Tennyson I came across that poem that never fails to stir my blood even now—"The Charge of the Light Brigade"—and as I lay, with half my mind on the poem, and the other half on the strike, the words :

"Theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die——"

crashed into my mind, mixing together the soldiers of the poem and the men of the pits.

I was terribly excited. Why hadn't all the clever people found this out? Wasn't it plain enough for everybody to see? The very quality which was praised in the men at Balaclava was being decried in the men of the pits. Foolishness! they called it when speaking of the miners. Loyalty! they called it when speaking of the soldiers. As usual I invented a word for it. Britishness I called it. I was bubbling over with my discovery. I would only have to point out to one or two of the men how hopeless it was for one section of the people to attempt to thrash that spirit out of another section, and things would soon be all right. The news would spread like the fire in the woods in September, and the men would tell each other about it at the street corners, they would spread it all over the country, and strikes would be a thing of the past. When I tried to tell people about my discovery I was bitterly disappointed—they laughed at me.

The great coal strike of 1926 will always live in my mind as the greatest experience of my life. During that scorching summer I tasted bitterness such as I pray I may never taste again, and I saw and felt happiness such as comes into one's life but seldom. At the beginning of the strike I had one best suit for Sundays, an old coat and a pair of shabby trousers for week-days and my pit clothes. Like most youths of my age I had begun to take an interest in the girls, and on

Sunday night would sally forth in all the glory of my cheap ready-made suit, and cloth cap with the tip broken and pulled down over one eye in the approved style, to stroll up and down the main street in order to "click." I was usually disappointed if I did "click," because the girls could only talk about dances and pictures. They never knew anything about books, or poetry or my Sherwood; but I still went on the "monkey parade," as it was called, in the hopes of some day finding a girl whom I could really talk to.

The strike continued and eventually my suit had to go to the "lugger" as most miners' suits do when a strike lasts any length of time. My week-day trousers gradually wore until they were beyond mending, and I was reduced to wearing my pit trousers. Just after the War, local shopkeepers had bought large stocks of those bright blue trousers which the wounded soldiers used to wear, and as they were sold cheap, the miners bought them for pit trousers. When the stocks of cast-off "hospital blues" had been used up, the manufacturers continued to make trousers of the same hue, and sold them as "hospital blues." Lots of men wore them in the pit, but nobody dreamed of wearing them at any other time. I had to wear mine week-days and Sundays alike. I couldn't bear to stay in the house, and so, in order to avoid

being seen, I would be away to the forest at the first peep of dawn, never returning until the sun had long gone down, and the streets were deserted. My boots became worn right through, and each day I would take with me a pocketful of pieces of cardboard with which I covered the holes in the boots to keep out the thorns. If I had to go out into the streets during the day I would sidle along the pavement as close to the wall as possible, trying not to be noticed. The shame of it all crushed me in a way that I can never tell, and I wished more than once that I were dead. It's all very well for people to say : "Clothes don't make a man," but "hospital blues" and boots with cardboard in the bottoms, and feet without socks, and hunger that never stops gnawing at your inside, don't make a man, either.

For a long time it seemed to me as if I was the only one who was suffering because of the strike. I was obsessed with the idea, and I sometimes think that I was on the verge of insanity. My books had gone, my clothes had gone. The only thing left to me was the forest, and my love for her grew with every hungry day. I honestly believe that I would have died, or gone insane, without her.

Then one afternoon as I was making for the forest a voice behind me said : "Tek thi time, lad." I knew the man quite well. He had several

kiddies and was a widower. Suffering from indifferent health, he was as often "on the club" as at work even when the pit was turning, and couldn't have had a penny by him when the strike began. As we walked along the hot road he was telling me of an amusing incident that had occurred whilst he had been waiting for his relief money that morning, and all the time he kept breaking off to chortle with glee. I eyed him with disfavour and refused to be amused. I told him that I couldn't see anything to laugh about. He stared at me for a moment, and then burst into a great peal of laughter. Throwing himself down under the shelter of the trees, which we had just reached, he lay face downwards and howled with glee, every few seconds he turned his head, looked at me, and then went off in another spasm of laughter. I hated him for his laughter. Then, as I stood looking down at him, I noticed his feet. One boot had hardly any sole at all. The sole of his foot had been bleeding and was caked with blood and dust. Yet he could laugh! He could laugh! and the best part of his life had gone. He had lost his wife. He had no boots and he was on strike. His position was seemingly hopeless. Yet he laughed, and rolled on the floor of the forest. . . .

Then I laughed. I laughed until the tears rained down my face and the sweat from my forehead mingled with the tears. I lay beside him

under the green of Sherwood and he laughed at me and I at him. A stranger would probably have thought us mad ; but we weren't—we were just a couple of colliers, and colliers can laugh, even at death.

When I became old enough I was allowed to go for an occasional half-pint in the pub near my home. One of the old-fashioned type of pubs, where the tables and forms were always scrubbed spotlessly white and the landlord took a real pride in always having his beer in tip-top condition. It pays a landlord to look after his beer in colliery districts, for the collier knows good beer when he tastes it. I loved those odd hours spent in the tap-room, the gleam of the pots and tankards in the fire-light, and what a fire-light ! None of the miserable two-bars-up fires that one sees in some places, but a real fire ! A fire that leapt and danced in the chimney, and warmed you through and through. A fire that made you happy and comfortable so that you leaned back against the polished panelling and took in everything without effort, in fact—"A Collier's Fire." Then the bursts of laughter as somebody relates an amusing story of some happening in the pit. The tremendous, but quite good-tempered, arguments on all kinds of subjects. What won the Oaks in 1920, was Jack Johnson a better fighter than Dempsey, who was Prime Minister at the outbreak of the War, what peas grow best on the

local soil ; I think I have heard every possible subject discussed in the tap-rooms. Miners will join in an argument on the speed of Tom Roberts's bitch, on the merits or otherwise of Herr Hitler, with equal gusto, and really enjoy themselves.

The pit is never absent from the conversation for long, and much as I disliked the pit I would be fascinated by the stories told--stories of disaster, and sudden death, of gas and water and strange unexplainable things that have happened in the depths of the mines. I have heard stories of heroism that would set the world ablaze with admiration (if the world could be made to understand), but the miners only tell them to each other, and usually close up like clams if anyone tries to make them talk.

Sometimes the news is brought in that one of the tap-room lads has been injured at work and is likely to be off a long time. Without any fuss a piece of cardboard, or a long sheet of paper, is begged from the landlord, and a subscription list started. The landlord starts it off with five or ten shillings, and few customers' names are missing on it when the week-end is over. There is no swank about these collections, nobody expects you to give more than you can afford. If you can manage a bob it's all right, but you don't get any more thanks than the chap that can only manage threepence. Then comes the job of

taking the money round to the man's home. Nobody seems to be very keen on the job. When somebody is approached on the subject he shuffles uneasily, glances round the room, picks somebody else out, and remarks : " Thee goo, Jim. Tha knows 'em better than me." Jim, not fancying the job, turns to another man : " Goo on, Sam. Tha used ter werk wi' 'im." Any sort of excuse is offered to get out of it, and when someone does go he hurries up to the door, dumps money and paper in the woman's hands, mutters something about " nivver knowin' whose turn it'll be next," and beats a hasty retreat. There is no desire to be thanked, no desire to appear kindly or matey ; but a hard-won and deep knowledge of the awful grind of poverty and hunger. They have driven the wolf away from another door for a while, and they are satisfied. I have known a couple of cabbages and a few potatoes be left on the doorstep, or a nice rabbit be hung on the door-knob without any indication as to who was the giver, and in all probability only a few days before the giver and the receiver had been threatening each other in the pit with the most blood-curdling oaths. Can you wonder that the casual visitor to the mining areas is totally unable to understand ? Can you wonder that the stranger returns to his own particular part of the country with totally wrong impressions ? I like to hear some M.P. who has represented a mining constituency for a

few years boasting that he understands the miner. It makes me laugh.

I am proud that I am a miner, and the son of a miner, and although I have hated the pit I am grateful for what the men of the pits have taught me.

CHAPTER VIII

POLITICS

THERE is a song that never fails to amuse me when I hear it sung—something about every child being a little Liberal or a little Conservative. It always reminds me of the first time I became enthusiastic over politics. I was about six years of age at the time, I believe, and my father, being a Liberal in those days, was loud in his praise of the Liberal candidate. The constituency was a “Tory” stronghold and everyone else in our street seemed to be Tories. People felt their politics more in those days, and as my father was only a Liberal because there was nothing better (or worse, according to how one views these things) he was looked at askance by other men in the street. My playmate, who lived a few doors away and whose father was one of the bluest of Tories, appeared one day with several inches of blue ribbon pinned on his coat, setting up the fashion for the rest of the children in the neighbourhood. Soon I was the centre of a crowd of children all demanding to know why I didn’t wear blue ribbon also, and calling me a “lousy Liberal.” I became very excited about it all and dashed off home to demand some ribbon.

My mother had several pieces of blue material which she tried to persuade me to wear in order to prevent my falling out with the other children, but I was determined to support my father and nothing but yellow would suffice. At length she yielded to my excited and tearful pleadings and as she could find no yellow cloth or ribbon she cut two long strips of yellow paper from the cover of a *Dainty* novel and thus bearing my party colour I went forth to do battle with the Tories.

It was polling day, and the schools being used for polling booths, we children were on holiday. We stood in the street watching the grown-ups going to vote, and whenever a person went by with his party colours on his coat we would cheer or catcall accordingly. I was fighting a losing battle all the time, for when a "blue" went by a terrific yell went up from the rest of the children and my solitary cheer for the occasional "yellows" was drowned by the catcalls of the others. Everybody wearing blue was claimed by my political opponents as a Tory—even if they wore a blue suit or dress, but I refused to be outdone and with tears streaming down my cheeks because of the unfair claims of my opponents, I remained to cheer the "yellows."

When the big horses from the local brewery went by with their tails and manes decorated with blue ribbons and the wheel spokes covered with blue paper, I almost gave up in despair, but the

knowledge that my father was a "yellow" kept me there even though my sobs prevented me from raising any more cheers. Then suddenly an awful thought occurred to me. I ran home, burst into the house, and demanded of my mother : " Does God really live in the sky ? " " Yes," she answered. " Then," I sobbed, as I tore off my political colours, " God must be a Tory because his house is blue."

As I grew older, being the son of a strong Trade Unionist and one who became a leading Socialist, I was expected to follow in father's footsteps. For a time I did so, and was to be found at all the political meetings in the town. Along with the rest of my mates I would stump and clap after a speech, and be very enthusiastic about Socialism. I would eagerly read the *Daily Herald* and retail little bits of news in the pit.

After a time I began to notice a sameness about the speeches and they were not so interesting. I knew what they were going to say next and would say it under my breath—" Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains"—then a pause for the clapping. "'Tis man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn," the speaker would say impressively as if he had made a discovery, and some of the men would say : " That's reight, lad," and then all the younger ones, filled more with enthusiasm than understanding, would

start to stump and clap again. Lastly the chairman would point out that the rent for the hall must be paid, and we would drop our coppers into the hat as we filed out.

I often wanted to ask questions, but if one did that one was regarded as being hostile to the movement. The chairman would say: "I don't suppose anyone wants to ask any questions, but——" and the speaker would be off the platform very often before anyone could. Once I actually got to my feet and started to ask one ; but the look of pained surprise on the faces of those on the platform caused me to sit down abruptly.

There was one speaker (a checkweighman) who was very popular, and was always in demand as a support for the main speaker at Socialist meetings, and he always said the same piece. I quickly learned most of it off by heart. The main theme of his little piece was that Capitalists were useless encumbrances like the warts on apple trees, and that the only thing to do with them was to prune them off.

After hearing it several times I became rather fed up with it and decided to do something about it. I had noticed that if he was interrupted at all he had a little difficulty in remembering where he had got to, so I went along to the next meeting with a plan.

When he had got to his favourite bit where he

made reference to the "warts," I suddenly yelled : " Why don't yer think of summut fresh ? " He floundered, totally unable to remember what came next. " Go on then," I called in a resigned tone of voice : " Start prunin'." The place rocked with laughter. But I didn't rock with laughter when I reached home, because father was waiting for me, and father always took political meetings seriously.

Some speakers, however, were very good indeed. I remember one in particular. He was the secretary of the agricultural workers union, and had been a farm worker all his life. His was not a fiery political speech at all. He spoke of the land as something alive and breathing, and he held the miners spellbound. He stirred me as few speakers have done, and I almost became a Socialist for good. But when, later in the meeting, a speaker made the usual observations about England being no different from any other country, I changed my mind again.

For a long time I was greatly troubled by these things. I wanted to be in the fight, but I also wanted to be sure that I was on the right side. All my childhood training urged me on toward Socialism. My mates continually reminded me of my father's victimisation after the strikes, and when I tried to point out that my father and the rest of the miners had possibly been misled into striking, I would be howled down.

That there was something wrong somewhere I was well aware. I had been aware of it since I was a tiny child. That the miners were the most downtrodden and least understood of all the workers in Great Britain I believed—and still believe for that matter ; but how, by striking or by class hatred, they could ever hope to improve their position I was unable to understand.

My books had taught me that the class which I was expected to hate so wholeheartedly had done many things for England. Its members had died along with members of my own class in every corner of the world because of their love of England, and I couldn't hate them. The first essential of a Socialist, according to my mates, seemed to be a deep and totally unreasoning hatred of anyone who didn't work with a pick and shovel or have calloused hands, excepting, of course, checkweighmen, Trade Union officials and the like who were expected to look well fed and prosperous.

One Sunday morning I went along to the local picture-house to hear a well-known Socialist speaker. He spoke well and interestingly for a long time about social evils and their remedies, and of how someday the world would be united into one great brotherhood. I liked him immensely, he was talking sense, I thought. Then, nearing the end of this speech he said (and I shall never forget the effect of his words on me):

“What is this England that you are supposed to love? It is only a tiny portion of the earth’s surface. Why should you be expected to love it, or be prepared to die for it any more than you would for Russia, or China, or Greenland?”

I was thunderstruck. “Because it’s England!” I yelled out in fury. “Is that the best reason you can give?” asked the speaker with a smile, breaking off his speech. “If so, you have a lot to learn, my young friend.” Everybody laughed at me as I went out. “And so have you a lot to learn,” I thought, “all the lot of you.” Didn’t they know that most of the happiness that ever I had came from this love of England that they spoke so contemptuously about? Didn’t they know that in the early winter mornings when the frost glittered on the hard-frozen fields and the air was so clear and sharp that it hurt one’s nostrils, or in the hot summer afternoons when the forest was quiet under the heavy heat except for the popping of the bursting broom-pods—that England spoke to one? How she told one the wonderful stories of famous men who fought and ruled and died because of their love for her. Of the simple men who toiled, ploughed, reaped, loved every handful of her brown soil and died still loving her. Did they think that they would ever persuade the farmers of England that they ought not to love the land which they tilled?

The Socialists, I decided, were a lot of mugs.

I didn't want anything to do with them, and I went home and told my father so. "Oh," said he, "I don't believe in that lot; England is England when all's said and done." Here was one of the staunchest of Socialists who had fought doggedly and suffered much in the cause of Socialism, denying what seemed to me to be one of the main things in his creed. I taxed many others on this point and found very few who would say that they really believed in that part of Socialism. The miner, I have found, loves his country as intensely as anyone else, even though he has much less to love it for than some have. If you ask the average miner what is the difference between the Conservative Party and the Socialist Party, he is almost certain to answer: "The Conservative Party looks after those who have money, and the Socialist Party looks after the working man." He knows nothing of Conservatism and little of Socialism.

I know that a lot of Socialists will scream indignantly about my insulting the miners, but I have been too long a miner not to know what I am saying. All that the ordinary miner understands about Conservatism is that local jumped-up people, with a small car and an equally small mind, and who live in the residential part of the town, as they love to call it, are Conservatives (or pretend to be). They who have made their money by selling him bacon, pit boots, and

insurance policies, and are now able to sit back in comfort and write to the local Press pointing out how the miner is in the wrong on each and every occasion, but who never in their lives entered a miner's home in order to get a proper understanding of him and his problems. I do not believe that the miner is so much against Conservatism as he is against these people, and he is justified in his attitude towards them. A favourite remark of theirs when speaking of the miner and his wages, is : " But they did earn good money during the War." Talk to any one of them about the miners and as surely as night follows day they will make that remark. Of course they earned good money ! and these very same people took it from him for cheese and margarine that wasn't quite so good. Sometimes these people manage to get into the local council through the aid of the local Conservative Association, but they are usually too busy with something else if a miner should ask for their help in any matter, and he is forced to go to the nearest Socialist councillor. I have known this to happen scores of times, and more than once in my own case. The Socialists get the reputation of always being ready to help the working man, and the result can be seen all too clearly in the general elections in the mining areas.

I am afraid that politics are not the same to-day. There is a bitterness underlying it all that seems

vastly different from the enthusiasm that prevailed when I was young. It may be that as I have grown older I have learned to detect that bitterness, and that it was there even when I was a child, but I doubt it. One does not see to-day, as I did as a child, the farmers and their wives coming into the town with the well-groomed cob, and spotless trap, colours in a big bow on the whip, gaily saluting other farmers and laughingly informing them that their man is *out* this time. Instead, one sees and feels a vindictiveness that is frightening.

Perhaps, as the world rights itself, the old spirit will return, and politics will once again be a matter for big rosettes and flying ribbons and laughing enthusiasm as it seemed to me once, and perhaps class hatreds will die. I hope so.

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CHAPTER IX

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

ONE becomes accustomed to the sight of blood after a few years in the pits, but I shall never forget my first sight of an injured man being carried towards the pit bottom. The sweating, half-naked, cursing men carrying the broken body of their mate, stumbling over the sleepers and rails, the feeble gleam of the miner's lamps carried by other mates. At one end of the stretcher a pair of hobnailed boots showing from beneath the blanket, at the other end a blackened, pain-distorted face, shiny with sweat and coal dust ; the strong faces of the stretcher-bearers altering only when they opened their mouths to curse with unnecessary emphasis as their feet caught against some obstruction, or to laugh too loudly at some feeble joke from the groaning man. The lights, bobbing up and down, fading into tiny pin-points as the procession travelled along the road, seemed like torches carried by dancing black demons in some awful sacrificial procession.

A few minutes afterwards the long trains of coal tubs resumed their journey along the same

road, the pulleys squealed, tubs of coal came in greater numbers because they had been accumulating at the far end whilst the rope had been standing, and the thin trail of blood spots, the only sign that the price of coal is far beyond reckoning, gradually dried on the white stone until it looked like a thin sprinkling of red confetti marking the passage of a wedding party.

You might feel inclined to ask : “ Why should an accident in the pit seem more terrible than one in a steelworks or in an iron foundry ? There is no more pain to the injured man.” It is because of the absence of the light of day. It is because of the feeling of being shut off from the sunshine and the trees and fields. It is a ghastly thing to contemplate—to close one’s eyes for the last time in the blackness of the pit with nothing to meet one’s dying gaze but a dripping black, half-mile-thick roof, with only the reeking pit smell in one’s nostrils, and those whom one loves not even knowing that one is dying. I know, because I have heard men beg to be got out of the pit before it was too late. The collier is a sun-worshipper. Many a summer’s day I have seen him sit until the very last minute in the sun on the pit bank. Every minute he is losing money as he sits there ; but it is hard to drag oneself to the pit shaft when the sun is bright and the larks are singing over the sidings.

Once we had a new parson in the town, and,

although he was a very nice old gentleman and the colliers always respectfully touched their caps when they met him, he was somewhat biased against them because so few of them went to his church.

Somebody obtained permission to take him down the pit for a look round. A few days afterwards I met him as I was going to work, and I asked him what he thought of the pit. He answered : " It is like going down into the depths of Hell," then, looking at me with a tender look in his eyes, he said : " When I came out into the sunshine again I learned more of God—and colliers—than I could ever have learned otherwise." He became a real friend to the colliers and a staunch champion of theirs at all times. He was respected as few parsons are respected in mining areas, and although they still preferred to bask in the sunshine on Sundays rather than go to his church, he never reproached them. When he died, he was more deeply mourned by the men of the pits than by his own congregation. " Seems funny not ter meet t'owd lad," they would say as they walked home from the pit, "'e wor a reight soort of a parson 'e wor."

I used to think that if it were possible for everybody to go down the pit on a summer's day for a few hours and then be suddenly shipped up the shaft into the sunshine they would see things as

the old parson saw them. I know well the feelings of the traveller when he sees again the green fields of England although I have never travelled. That funny tingly feeling at the back of the head, that half-laugh, half-sob, that escapes no matter how one tries to hold it, when the green of the fields and trees seems to sink through the eyes right into the brain, bringing peace and quiet. I have experienced it hundreds of times as I walked out of the pit cage because the pit to me wasn't England at all.

I came to love that sudden change from darkness to light. The men waiting in the pit bottom on their turn to ascend the shaft would eagerly ask of those coming down: "What kind of a day is it?" but I used to try not to hear the answers. I liked to find it myself as I ran across the pit bank. Sometimes the air would be marvellously clear, the sun bright, and the wind swaying the trees gently, everything laughing aloud. Sometimes the sun would be ablaze, the heat rising in ripples from the grass, and gorse bushes (the shimmering heat is always more noticeable over the gorse bushes) and the fields would be smiling ever so gently as they lay in the sun, and I would creep through a gap in the hedge into the long grass, unable to wait until I had washed the dirt of the pit from my body. I would throw open my shirt-front, take off my sweaty cap, heavy boots and sodden stockings,

and lie and smile with the fields. Sometimes the rain would be beating down on to the trees and sweeping across the fields all around me as I walked home, the earth would be chuckling and gurgling as if secretly amused about something. Every day was different ; always as I walked along the high gantry from the pit mouth, I could find something fresh in the view over the fields and woods, and the days of darkness in the pit helped me to see these things all the more clearly.

Once I heard one of the colliers, who was also a poacher, remark that there were two nightingales in a certain part of the forest, and I decided that I would go immediately after supper that night to hear them. I was on the afternoon shift and, being in a hurry to get to the place, which was at least two miles away, I went without washing the thick coal-dust from my face. Walking silently through the woods I eventually reached the spot and quietly sat down. I had not long to wait before the birds began their song, and for a long time I sat contentedly listening. At last they ceased to sing and I rose to go home. Suddenly there was a rustling behind the hedge on the other side of the lane, and a voice said : " Well ! worn't that grand ? " Through a gap in the hedge and into the lane filed seven colliers, each with the grime of the pit still on his face. Seven black, rough, swearing colliers had walked

two miles after a hard shift in the pit and had sat for close on two hours in silence listening to the song of a bird.

The beauty of the forest is a very persistent thing. In the most unexpected places at the most unexpected times one meets it. One particular instance will always live in my mind. I was working on a lonely week-end shift in the pit bottom, and I received word by 'phone from the pit bank that the shaftsmen were going to grease the conducting ropes. To do this the two men must stand on the top of the cage, and daub on the thick, black, smelly grease as the cage slowly descends the shaft. It is a nerve-wracking job, and the men must possess nerves of steel. It is also a very dirty job as they are soon covered from head to foot with grease and dirt, in addition to being drenched sometimes with the salty water pouring down the shaft. At first nothing could be heard in the pit bottom but the swish of falling water, and the smack of grease falling on the sodden sump boards. Then faintly the voices of the men singing as they worked. The sound echoed and rolled in the shaft, gradually growing louder as they sank deeper into the earth until suddenly I was able to recognize the song :

“ Oh ! the oak and the ash,
And the bonny ivy tree
They flourish at home
In my own_countree.”

The rough voices, mellowed by the echoing shaft, were like those of the choir in some great cathedral, and to me, standing in the damp gloom of the pit bottom, half a mile from the green earth, it seemed as if the sun and trees and the bracken had suddenly merged into a gorgeous green-gold liquid, and was pouring down the shaft, filling the pit with all the light, sound and colour of Sherwood. As they climbed down to the sump boards when the cage had landed at the bottom, it seemed unbelievable that they, in their filthy, grease-caked, sweat-sodden clothes, could have been responsible for the beauty which had come pouring into the pit to the tune of an old English song.

On the return journey they again burst out into the same tune, and as they slowly neared the surface, where grew the oak and the ash, their voices became fainter and fainter until like a thin wavering gleam of Sherwood sunlight the last words of their song gleamed in the darkness of the pit and died away :

“ Oh ! the oak and the ash,
And the bonny ivy tree
They flourish at home
In my own countree.”

The falling water swished into the pit bottom ; the grease smacked on the sump boards—and I sat and cried.

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Once somebody nailed a large sprig of holly laden with bright crimson berries on the big wooden baulk that ran across the pit bottom, and underneath it wrote the words—"A Merry Christmas." I wanted to take it out of the pit because it didn't seem right for it to be imprisoned ; but I liked to have it there, over my head, as I worked. The night before Christmas Eve they brought a lad into the pit bottom on the stretcher. He was in a bad way, and his father, who had helped to carry him, was almost insane with worry and grief. As they stood waiting for the cage to take them out of the pit, the father caught sight of the holly with its message underneath, and with a half-scream, he tore it down and threw it into the sump. Long after they had taken the lad out, the bright berries shone on the blackness of the sump boards until gradually their brightness was dimmed, and finally buried beneath the filth of the pit.


Occasionally sparrows would be found fluttering around the pit bottom terrified. I think that they had perched on the top of the cage whilst it was at the top of the shaft, and when it suddenly started to descend, had been too amazed to fly off. I well remember seeing a burly collier step out of the cage one "knock-off" carrying his folded cap tenderly in his hand. When he reached the open air he carefully opened the cap, and out fluttered a sparrow. As it

fluttered about, seemingly at a loss what to do, and no doubt blinded by the sudden change from darkness to light, the man watched it anxiously. Then as it found its bearings and flew away over the power-station, he chuckled : " Wish ar cud do that," he said, "'ev a pair of wings and fly away from t'pit." I knew what he meant all right. It is the constant dream of colliers to leave the pit, never to return ; but few ever manage it. An old chap who had been crippled in the pit and had been given a light job on the surface, was standing near. " Thee keep gooin' darn there," he said, pointing toward the shaft, " an' tha'll get sum wings reight enuff, but," he said with a grin as he measured the hefty collier with his eyes, " tha'll 'ev ter fly up't shaft 'cos nobody can bring thee up in a cap."

That's how things go in the pits. Tenderness and harshness, beauty and foulness, seriousness and grim humour, all mixed into a strange medley that keeps one always wondering what's going to happen next. Nobody can ever get really used to it. I have seen tiny pony-drivers using the most fearful language as they gave the ponies apples which they had bought with their scanty pocket money, or feeding them with fresh grass gathered on their way to work. I have seen a young man, one of the toughest I ever knew, and who was capable of whipping any other man

in the pit in a fight, actually in tears because his pony had been sent into another district. Another time I saw a man who was nothing at all to look at, crawl over some tubs, under a roof that was threatening to come down any second, in order to cut loose a pony that was entangled in its gears and was thrashing about because it knew that the roof was about to fall. It was one of the bravest things that I ever saw. And then the man suddenly darted back into the awful danger to fetch his knife which he had forgotten : "Ar wouldn't like ter lose it," he said. "Yer see, it used ter belong ter me dad."

Over forty tons of stone fell on the spot a few minutes later. It is hard to understand men like that, and I do not think that any man not born and bred a miner ever could do so. The most that one could ask for is that the people of this country should unite in demanding a proper wage for them and better conditions both in the pit and at home.



CHAPTER X

SHERWOOD

I ONCE asked a gamekeeper what animal caused him the most worry. I was thinking of stoats, weasels, foxes, and their like. But he answered sourly : " Colliers."

I knew well enough what he meant, for the collier, when he sets his hand to it, is the most skilful of poachers. I loved to watch them go out in the evening, slipping silently along a forest path, single file like Indian Braves, but not a bit like Indians in their appearance. Old slouch hats, short coats with big bulging pockets, a cosh pushed down the back of the coat and sticking out above their heads. Every one of them knew me, and I them, but it is the poacher's law that you must not speak to them by name when they are "going out." A gamekeeper might be hiding in the bushes and a "Good night ! Chippy," or "How-do ! Toby," has put a man in "clink" before now.

Sometimes I have met the gamekeeper or the "slop" (policeman) after the boys had gone by. "See any men along there, sonny ?" he would ask casually. "No," I would answer just as casually. I used to wonder which was the right thing to do,

tell lies for the poachers, or truth for the gamekeepers and slops. The fact that the poachers were colliers like my dad made me decide in their favour, but if I saw the enemy before they saw me I would hide in the bracken until they had gone by so that I didn't have to tell the lie.

Periodically the gamekeepers and police will set a trap for the poachers, nets and rabbits will be confiscated, and the men fined or jailed according to their records. And some of them have very impressive records. Twenty previous convictions for trespassing in search of coneys is only an amateur's record by their reckoning. They will cheerfully sally forth a few hours after the fine is imposed to try to catch a few more rabbits to pay off the fine.

Now, if a poacher has a really good night he will never make more than eight shillings. He will come home weary and sodden, having walked miles. Very often he will not have made more than three shillings, and sometimes nothing at all. He has risked illness by getting soaked, fines or imprisonment by the law, and also lost a shift's work at the pit where he might have earned as much as ten shillings. "Why in Heaven's name does he do it, then?" you ask. I think I know.

Before industry came to Sherwood bringing in its train the hideous slag heaps, the reeking pubs and the long rows of ugly black hovels with

their filthy back alleys, the miners' forebears knew and loved the forest. She fed them, housed them, eased them of their pains with her many herbs, and, when the time came, took them to her bosom and buried them in her heart. To-day the miner, sweating and straining in the darkness of the pit, hears her call to him, and the blood of his ancestors courses more strongly in his veins at the call of love. The love of the forest is a lasting thing. It is no light emotion to be satisfied by a glimpse of her at odd times.

For the files of poaching miners who pass silently into the forest are fired by the same spirit that sent Drake in search of adventure. Theirs is the same urge that has made the English tongue known in every corner of the world, and the same love of the English country-side that sent John Peel hallooing after the fox. Perhaps you may not agree with the last bit. You may say that a man who loved the country-side would not rush about it chasing foxes.

But it is not the fox that matters. It is the scent of the earth and the woods, the taking of an awkward fence or ditch, the danger, the risk, the adventure of it all. These are the bonds between the fox-hunting gentry and the rabbit-poaching miner. One chances a broken neck, the other fourteen days in jail. They are both English under the skin and God grant that neither will ever forget it.

Once during the latter end of a coal strike the Duke of Portland threw his great Welbeck estate open to the miners so that they could go rabbiting to their hearts' content. The miners, suffering as they were, saw the joke—and so, I am convinced, did the Duke of Portland. It was interesting to hear the collier telling the gamekeeper where the rabbits were most numerous.

At one time I was working in a particularly bad part of the pit, and as I was undressing to begin the day's work a pit surveyor who was also measuring up in that part said : "Do you know that we are right under Clumber Wood?"

It had never occurred to me that there was anything above my head but stone. "Yes," he said, "and it's only half a mile away."

Clumber Wood ! And there I was in a narrow black tunnel dripping with sweat. Clumber Wood !—with its beeches and bracken and lovely little hollows where I could lie all day without seeing a soul.

But that knowledge (although it hurt me to think of it in the pit) made me love Clumber more than ever. Why, the name itself tells you how lovely it is—Clumber Wood ! Just listen to a few more of the names of places in Sherwood—Edwinstowe, Welbeck, Thoresby, Rufford, Drinking Pit Lane, Bothamsall, Hardwick—and I have worked in the pit below them for years.

It's strange how you can be friendly with a

person and never get to know him properly until some little incident reveals a fellow-feeling that you never suspected. Once I was sitting on a fence near to a chestnut tree that some mischievous children had stripped of bark. Along came a chap whom I had known ever since I could remember, and, truth to tell, had feared a little. Joe, his name was. I never knew his surname until I saw his funeral.

He was reckoned by everybody to be a bad 'un. More than once he had been to jail for assaulting the gamekeepers who had caught him poaching. When he saw the poor damaged tree he stopped, walked round it, and then came towards me with a decidedly nasty look in his eyes. "Nar then ! yer young devil," he said, "ar would tha loike me ter strip t'skin off thy back ?" To say I was frightened is to put it mildly. I had heard tales about Joe and his habit of thrashing gamekeepers. "Why ?" I managed to gasp. "Why !" he said. "Why ! Does tha think that tree can't feel owt ? Why doan't yer leave things alone wot doesn't belong ter yer ?" Thus spoke Joe, who had done time for poaching. I managed to prove to him that I was not the culprit by turning out my pockets and showing that I had no knife.

When he had cooled down a bit and had taken a seat on the fence I said to him. "Do you like the woods, Joe ?" "Ar," said Joe. I sat quiet

waiting for him to say something else, but he never spoke. After a time I said : " I love the woods." " Doan't be daft," answered Joe in a funny sort of voice.

Many times after that Joe would say as he passed my favourite seat on the fence. " Cum on, nipper, would tha loike ter see sum young robins?" or " Would tha loike ter see a real fox's lair?"

He taught me many things about the forest and the ways of its little people, but he never knew the value of the first lesson that he gave to me.

Joe is dead now. He suffered terribly with asthma. It gets most poachers. The constant soaking and lack of hot baths brings it on and the stuffy little hovels make it worse. The chestnut tree is dead, too, but it still stands to remind me of Joe whenever I pass it.

When I was thirteen years of age I had to leave school to go to the pit.

It was in the month of May that I first went into the pit's shadows. The scent of maybloom still reminds me of that first morning when I clumped along the road in heavy hob-nailed boots that rubbed my heels till they were raw. My eyes were puffed for want of sleep, and stuffed in my shirt front I had four slices of bread and dripping wrapped in newspaper.

Not a very auspicious start as a wage-earner,

nor did I like it in the slightest degree. But as I look back on those days I can remember small things that gave me pleasure which I should never have had if my childhood had taken me in easier ways—the sudden flash of sunlight through the bars of the pit cage as we came to the surface after hours in the backness of the pit—that's when I first realised the value of sunshine. Before then I had always accepted the sunshine as something all right and pleasant, and thought no more about it. I don't mean its value as a health giver or as a means of getting tanned. I mean its value as dispeller of gloom, its promise of better, cleaner things. Its assurance that, however black and miserable the pit might be, I would find the forest all the more beautiful when I got back to it.

The song of the lark also seemed to be clearer, sweeter when I heard it singing over the pityard. Larks seem to show a preference for nesting near pit sidings, and singing over the pit bank when the morning shift is going down.

When I was in the home I was constantly in trouble for being clumsy, and there is no doubt at all that I was clumsy, being a tall, gangling lad, all knees and feet. Try as I might, things would be upset, pots broken, and everything in a mess whenever I was in the house. Yet the minute I set foot on the springy turf of the

forest I would feel a difference in my whole body that I could never explain to myself.

It was not imagination, of that I am certain. In a second I would change from a clumsy collier lad to a soft-footed, silent being, never rustling the leaves or snapping dead branches underfoot. I have many times approached within a few feet of playing rabbits. I have picked the mother-bird from her nest. I have passed within a few feet of the sharp-eyed, sharp-eared gamekeeper without the slightest fear of being detected. It was not that I tried consciously to be silent, or fancied myself as a woodsman. It was more a feeling of being in the proper place. It is hard to explain in words what I mean, but maybe there are amongst my readers some who have felt that same strange influence which the forest has over those who love her.

I have seldom heard God mentioned in the pit except in blasphemy, but once I listened to a set of men discussing Him over their bread and dripping. One of the men (a Welshman) spoke beautifully of the love of God for some time and I felt drawn to him, because it needs a man with courage to speak of God in the pit. When the others had gone back into the "stall" I asked him if he liked walking in the forest, and he answered: "I have no time to WASTE walking in the forest, I have to look after the chapel." "But surely," I said, "the abundance of flowers

in the forest is a proof of the love of God, is it not?" He then proceeded to warn me of the awful consequences of non-attendance at chapel and promised to say a special prayer for me. I left him to say the prayer and as I crawled along the coal face I called back to him: "Ask for a bit more time to WASTE also." That he was a good and sincere man I do not doubt for a minute, but the word WASTE hurt me. I began to wonder if I was getting too fond of the woods, so for three weeks I attended the chapel and tried my best to understand. On the fourth Sunday I said my prayers in the forest and I have said them in the forest ever since.

Sometimes there would be for days a shortage of railway wagons, and I would be waiting at home for the sound of the pit buzzer proclaiming a holiday for the following day. If it blew it meant a whole day in the forest for me, and a shortage of food at home. If it didn't blow it meant no day in the woods, but plenty of food. I never knew which to hope for, because it seemed as if my day of freedom was too expensive, and on the other hand a day of imprisonment was worth more than a bit of extra food.

It was the same during the strikes. I used to build a sort of hut with dead branches covered with a thick layer of bracken, and every day of the strike would be full of happiness from dawn to sunset. But one thing was always there to

make me realise that everything had to be paid for—that gnawing pain under the belt. How those who had no Sherwood to go to managed to keep fighting I have never understood. Had it not been for her I would have ceased fighting many years ago.

You have probably heard how a miner feeds his whippet on beef-steak and lets his children starve, and wondered if it is really true.

Well, here's the truth of the matter. In the first place he doesn't have a whippet, at least not in this part of the world. The dog he has is the strangest combination of all the dogs in creation, or so it seems. Strange, shambling, scrubby-looking mongrels, with neither grace, good looks, not any single thing in their appearance that would attract the most ardent dog-lover.

Trotting along at the heels of their masters, showing neither pleasure nor discontent, asking for no praise or petting, taking a hiding for misbehaving without a whimper, they are indeed a puzzle. But watch one when his master speaks, when he gets the sight of a rabbit. See his whole body transformed as he speeds after his quarry; his long awkward-looking legs are no longer awkward. He is no longer ugly. He becomes a picture of speed that must be seen to be believed, and fortunate is the rabbit that escapes when Mick or Nell or Spot is on his track.

During the hot summer of 1926, when the big coal-strike was in progress, the miners of this district seemed to change in a most amazing way. For the first week or two of idleness they hung around the street corners in a wondering sort of way, discussing the situation, and breathing threats against all and sundry. Gradually they ceased to bother so much, and began to organise all sorts of things without the aid of those who had led them to strike.

A party of them went along to the big college near to the town, and asked the Headmaster if he had any old cricket tackle that they might be able to mend and use. The Headmaster, like the grand sportsman that he was, did not start to lecture the men about the evils of striking, but immediately set masters and boys to hunt up bats, balls, pads, etc., and the smile on his face when he saw the men march away loaded with tackle was good to see.

Day after day, right through that terrible six months, in a field bounded on one side by Sherwood, the miners lay in the sun, or under the trees of Sherwood, and talked of cricket and gardens and crops as if to the manner born. In a few short weeks they had cast off the deadening influence of the pits, and had become living counterparts of their great-grandfathers who had played their games and talked of their gardens in these same fields in the days before the pits

were sunk. The scent of the trodden grass, the crack of the ball on the bat, the excited yelling of the children as the batsmen sneaked a run, all these things seemed to give a happiness and contentment that could never be got from the pit by bigger wages or pit-head baths. I sometimes wonder, does the miner really strike for better wages or shorter hours? Or does his body become sun-hungry? I wonder!

I shall always treasure in my mind the picture of an oldish miner who was playing in a match (Married-'uns *versus* Single-'uns) as he strode grimly to the wicket in pads, gloves and little cricket bat, encouraged by the supporters of the Married-'uns. As he stood at the wicket taking his centre from the umpire he displayed to the hilarious spectators several inches of shirt protruding from a hole in the seat of his trousers. When he realised what the noise was about he turned to the umpire and borrowed his long white coat. The astonishing spectacle of a batsman with a long coat trailing behind him like a bridal train, whilst with hefty swipes he knocked up runs for the "Married-'uns," was a sight worth seeing.

The match was played for the stakes of three-pence per man. Each member of the losing team paying that sum to one of the winning team. Next day "old Ted," the hero in the umpire's coat, received from his team mates a

present, bought with the coppers they had won—a pair of decent second-hand trousers.

There was much merriment when the trousers were presented, but behind that merriment there was hidden that spirit of comradeship and sympathy which makes a man feel proud of his kind, and keeps alive in his heart that spirit of hope without which he would surely die. The laughter echoed in among the trees of Sherwood and seemed to rebound with greater force, as if she herself was overjoyed at the return of her children, and that night the world seemed to me to be happier and more pleasant than ever before—but I went to bed hungry, and so did many of the cricketers.

I read an article some time ago written by some learned gentleman who had gone to a lot of trouble in order to prove that there never was a Robin Hood who lived in Sherwood. “Debunking,” they called it. Well! he is a much cleverer chap than I am, and no doubt he has plenty of evidence to prove what he says. But I wouldn’t mind betting a shilling that the gentleman has never been in Sherwood. If he would spend one summer in Sherwood he would believe not only in Robin Hood, but in a lot more things besides, for one feels that fairies or pixies or goblins or anything are liable to pop up any second, and Robin Hood and Friar Tuck and all his merry rascals suddenly appearing out

of the green would not cause one the slightest surprise. It is said of bold Robin that he robbed the rich to give to the poor—I know a Robin Hood who is alive to-day, but he goes under the peculiar title of “Spitter.” A lively customer is “Spitter,” with a list of “previous convictions” that puts the Clerk of the Court out of breath before he gets to the end when reading them out. One day somebody mentioned that poor old Tommy So-and-so was bad in bed again, and their Liz was crying because they had nowt in t’ouse.

“Spitter” never said anything, but casually whistling his two dogs he ambled off in the direction of the woods. He returned in about an hour with a suspicious bulge in his coat. Walking into Tommy’s house without bothering to knock, he threw a couple of rabbits on to the table. “Theer tha art,” he said, “get them in t’pot an’ shut thi blasted row up.” When Liz tried to thank him he said with a sly grin: “Doan’t thank me, lass, send a letter ter ’im wor ar pinched ’em off.” There’s a Robin Hood that would take a lot of debunking.

There has been not one Robin Hood, but thousands. Sherwood breeds them. It is as natural to them to help others as it is to breathe.

I would never have understood my own kind had Sherwood not taught me to do so. I would

not have loved the forest so much, had not the pit taught me to do so. They are both linked together in my mind and I find it impossible to speak of one without the other. It is from these things that I have gained all the important things of life.

The first time that I read that book which I think practically every child in England has read and loved, *Treasure Island*, was in the forest. When I was sixteen years of age I read Maurice Maeterlinck's play, *The Blue Bird*, in the pit half a mile below the lime tree and the fir tree. Listen to his description of some of the trees of the forest: "The lime tree is placid, familiar and jovial, the beech elegant and agile, the birch white, reserved and restless, the willow stunted, dishevelled and plaintive, the fir tree tall, lean and taciturn." I carried that book in my pocket for weeks, snatching odd minutes to read it, until it became so black with oil and sweat that I could no longer make out the words.

About the same time I remember buying from a second-hand bookstall a dilapidated copy of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*. I paid fourpence for it out of my shilling pocket money. I took it to the pit with me on the Monday morning. My job was to look after a set of points over which went the full tubs of coal, but becoming engrossed in the beautiful sadness of the book I completely forgot the pit and the tubs of coal

until with a crash several tubs of coal smashed into a gang of empties.

Along came the beefy pit corporal whose job it was to see that things kept on the move.

"Wot's tha bin up to?" he stormed; then, spotting the book which I was endeavouring to hide in the top of my pit knickers, "Gimme that!" Then after giving me a hefty clout he proceeded to put things to rights. As we ascended the shaft at the end of the shift he slipped the book into my hand. "Cum up ter our 'ouse in t'mornin'," he said; "ar've two or three books for yer all abart poetry, an' they ain't any use ter me—BUT IF THA BRINGS 'EM DARN T'PIT I'LL KNOCK THI BLOCK OFF." He didn't understand poetry, but he understood kindness in his rough way, and I think he dimly realised that there was something missing in his life.

So, my life has been a strange medley of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, beautiful words and foul pit-language. With tears always behind the laughter and laughter following close on the tears—and over it all the shadows and lights of Sherwood.

The hunger from which I have suffered so much (and still suffer from) has taught me to appreciate the goodly simple English food as it should be appreciated. The roast beef, the Yorkshire pudding—they are real to me as they were real to my forebears.

The few odd books which I have managed to get hold of have taught me to love the English language and the beauties of the written word. My Sherwood has taught me to seek for these things because they are English, for there is nothing to my mind which speaks of England in the way that the forest does.

CHAPTER XI

COLLIERY VIGNETTES

AT the age of twenty-two I was married. By that time I had been made an "onsetter." The "onsetter" is the man in charge of the signals in the pit bottom. It is his responsibility to see that the cage is loaded properly with coal, or, at the end of the shift, with men, and he signals to the engine-winder on the surface. It is an exacting job, for a mistake on his part can create havoc in the shaft or even death to the men who load the cages.

I worked at the bottom of the downcast shaft. That is the shaft down which is drawn the fresh air which travels round the miles of workings. In the winter months it is bitterly cold because one is working in a strong current of air all the time. As one cage is ascending full of tubs of coal, the other is descending with its load of empties. For seven and a half hours, except for a twenty minutes' break for "snap," I had to stand with my eyes fixed on the shaft bottom waiting for the appearance of the cage. The cages weigh something like six or seven tons, and the huge winding engines whisk them up and down at

terrific speeds. As they travel from pit bottom to surface and from surface to pit bottom, the cages roar and boom in the shaft like wild things. Crash ! it goes as one lands on the sump boards. Bang ! go the full tubs as they run into the cage, the onsetter straining to get them on in the space of a few seconds. Ping ! goes the bell signalling that the top deck is loaded. Click ! goes the bell push as the onsetter in charge, with a swift glance making sure that everybody is clear, signals the cage away, and quick as lightning the seven-ton cage flashes out of the bottom on another journey.

I used to be stiff with the cold, wet through with the water that is constantly falling down the shaft and half-blinded by the coal dust that blew back into my face each time the cages were loaded. From fifty to sixty times each hour this performance had to be gone through for the whole of the shift. It is unbelievably monotonous and wearying. I have gone home scores of times too tired and sick at heart to eat my dinner. My wage for this job was about nine shillings per shift.

The occasional repair shifts at the week-ends were very acceptable. I received "time and a half" for one of these, and all I had to do was to wait in the pit bottom to send "riders" out of the pit for their tools or whatever they needed. Sometimes I would not see a soul except the

deputy for the whole of the shift. Curled up on a big box, with overcoats and bags wrapped round me, I would be able to read to my heart's content. On Sunday evenings, when the organs were pealing in village churches, when the silver-voiced, white-surpliced choir boys sang in the great cathedrals, or the congregations over the length and breadth of the land knelt in prayer, I sat there on my tool-box, half a mile from the surface, one mile from the nearest church and seemingly hundreds of miles from God, reading the *Canterbury Tales*, Lamb's *Essays*, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, or anything that I could manage to get hold of. Or on the hot Saturday afternoons in the summer, when the crowds blinked in the sun at Lords or the Oval, I sat on the same box, with pencil and paper, trying to paint word-pictures of my Sherwood.

If anybody came into the pit bottom I would hastily hide my poems, and pretend to be entering details of material sent out of the pit, in the book provided for that purpose.

One day as I was struggling with one of my poems, all about

"Leaves and bracken, and tall oak trees,
Waving bare arms in the Autumn breeze,"

an underground fitter came hurrying into the bottom. He was lathered with sweat and oil, and over his back he carried a large bag of heavy

spanners, nuts and bolts, and spare engine parts. As he stood waiting for the cage to land which was to take him out of the pit, he spotted the paper that in my haste to hide I had dropped on the floor. He picked it up and read it carefully, making no comment. Then as he stood in the cage ready to be whipped up to the sunshine he said : " No good, lad. Tha wants ter read Shelley's stuff. That's *poetry* ! " I clicked the bell-push and he flashed out of my sight.

Poetry in a mining district is necessarily a hardy growth. I should imagine that there are few more miserable or depressing sights than a colliery village on a wet winter morning, particularly when one has just left a roaring " collier's fire " to walk to the pit for the day's work. The men in parties of four or five trudging silently through the mud, hands buried deep in pockets, shoulders hunched against the bitter early morning wind, and the water gurgling in black streams along the gutters all seem to make everything seem hopeless and vile. I remember very well indeed the first wet morning on which I took my place in a group of men walking to the pit. It had been snowing during the night, but in the early morning rain was falling as we started off. Along the road we went, heads bowed, coat collars turned up round our ears. Gradually our shoulders became sodden, and the water found its way through our cheap boots. I was

thinking of the fire that I had left seemingly hours ago, and the big mugs of hot tea that mother always gave us before starting off. The sleep still in my eyes (we had to be out of bed at 4 a.m.) and the cold winds made me practically blind as I followed along in a funny sort of stumbling walk. When we arrived at the lamp cabin one of the men, before handing his "lamp check" in, took off his sodden cap, squeezed the water out of it, smoothed back his wet hair and at the same time looked solemnly up towards the sky. Then in a tone of voice that was a strange blend of misery and mirth he remarked to his mate: "Does tha know wot ar think, 'Erbert? Ar think it's gooin' ter clear up—an' be wet."

To this day I do not know whether to laugh or cry when I think of that remark.

It does not always rain in the neighbourhood of the pit headgears. Near my home there stands a beautiful old fourteenth-century Gatehouse with an old market cross. In the misty quiet of the summer mornings the Gatehouse always looked more beautiful than at any other time, and I used to go out of my way to look at it before going to the pit. I loved to try and picture the busy scenes around the cross in the days before pits were thought of, and it was strange to be suddenly brought back to reality by the burst of laughter from parties of miners, with their tin bottles slung on their backs, who

waited there for the bus to take them to more distant collieries.

I loved the conversation of the colliers as they stood near the old place, in spite of the fact that it was often plentifully besprinkled with rough words. They would switch over from politics to the day's horse-racing, or from religion to the price of pit boots, in an astounding way. One morning as we stood there a furious argument was in progress as to how many children a miner could afford to have ; the older men said everybody should have at least four children ; the younger ones said two was enough, and some even said none at all. As the argument went on I suddenly remembered how in hunting around in the old graveyard at the back of the Gate-house as a boy I had come across an old stone, moss-covered and half buried. With a good deal of scraping and cleaning I had managed to read the inscription on it—a sorrowing husband extolling the merits of a loving and faithful wife mentioned, among other things, that she was the mother of twenty-three children. I forgot the men and the pit and became lost in my own thoughts. Twenty-three sons and daughters ! How did they live ? Did the father bring them up properly ? Of course he did ! He must have been proud of them and of his wife, or why should he tell the world about it.

As we walked on to the pit bank I told one

of the men about the old gravestone and its inscription. "Ar," he said bitterly, "I know, but there worn't any pits waitin' ter tek 'em in them days." I learned afterwards that he had lost two sons in an explosion and their bodies had never been recovered. Nowadays many miners will keep their sons in idleness rather than send them to the pits. I don't know whether this is a good thing or not. I certainly do not agree with the custom of sending lads straight from school into the mine, but on the other hand, mining is an honourable calling and conditions are rapidly improving. Some lads are completely broken in spirit after a few months in the pit, whilst others take to it from the start. I suppose that before long there will have to be some method of selecting those who are best fitted for a miner's life, and the selected ones will be able to command a wage more in proportion to the danger and arduousness of that life.

This would result in greater efficiency, fewer accidents, greater output, and a better feeling between master and man—all of which are badly needed if the industry is to survive.

Mining need not be the brutal thing that it has been for so long ; it has bred many gentlemen in spite of its brutality. I believe sincerely that it can breed many more.

CHAPTER XII

MINING CHARACTERS

THE coalfields abound in interesting characters. During my life I have known many. Grave, gay, clever, stupid, but all without exception showing unmistakably their English origin—sometimes in a way that hurts the beholder. The Englishman's ability to poke fun out of his own mistakes and misfortunes has for many years been a fascinating thing to me. Miners have that ability to an astonishing degree.

There is in my home town a little miner whose puckish humour is a constant source of entertainment to the rest of the miners in the neighbourhood. Once, having got too deeply in debt during a strike, his home was being stripped of its few bits of furniture by the "bums" (bailiffs). Crouched, collier fashion, on his heels, a forlorn little figure, he silently watched the "bums" carrying out the furniture. When the last piece had been loaded on to the dray and the despoilers were preparing to leave, he remarked to his tearful wife in tones loud enough to be heard in the street: "Well, lass, they've left us t'clock, anyway." Back came the "bums" with a rush.

"Where is this clock?" one of them demanded. The little chap eyed him pathetically: "Surely yer can leave me that, can't yer?" "No," said the "bum," "we can't." The argument went on for some time, the "bum" demanding to be shown the clock, and the little miner pleading to be allowed to keep it. "Yer'd nivver be able ter carry it," he said. The "bums" were getting excited by this time. They had visions of a big grandfather clock hidden in some corner. They became angry.

"All right," he said resignedly, and pointing to the wall over the fireplace: "Goo on, tek it!" On the wall he had drawn in chalk a rough sketch of a wall clock.

As the "bums" left the house, the laughter of the little man, as he rolled on the floor of his empty home, followed them. The joke, according to his point of view, was on them.

A day or two afterwards he was asked how he and the wife and children managed to get their meals without a table to sit down to. "Oh," he said with a chuckle, "ar soon settled that problem. Ar've cut a lot er round 'oles through t'floor boards an' we sit on t'floor wi' ar legs danglin'." Which was another way of telling the enquirer to mind his own business. The miner detests a nosey-parker.

The same amusing fellow, once during the hard times, had managed to procure a rabbit for

dinner. He had a large number of children, all small, and as he was carving the rabbit, the children seated round the table were chorusing : " Give me a leg, dad, give me a leg." With pretended ferocity, but heaven only knows what pain in his heart, he burst out : " Shurrup, will yer ? " and then, his irrepressible sense of humour coming to the surface in spite of everything, he said : " 'Ow many legs do yer think the damned thing's got ? It's a rabbit, not a spider ! "

One is forced to admire men like that no matter what their political or religious views may be. If they curse a lot, it is because they know no other means of expressing themselves. If they strike, it is because they have never been shown properly how else to attempt to better their lot. If they are stubborn, it is because they have it in their very bones to be so. They are English to the core and the gift of being able to laugh at themselves (for it is a gift) is the clearest of all evidence of their being English.

Another most interesting thing about miners is their love of music. They are not contented merely to sit and listen either. One is constantly being surprised to discover that most unlikely looking men can produce really good music. I say " unlikely " looking men, because I have always been led to believe that a musician, as a rule, possesses certain characteristics—sensitive features, long delicate fingers, and sometimes

long flowing hair. The miner musician is not a bit like that. I cannot claim to be a judge of either musicians or music. I know nothing about them. To me a sheet of music has no meaning whatever, but like most people I have an appreciation of some kinds, and the music of miners has a charm of its own. Some faint realisation of what music can mean to those who love it was brought home to me on a still August evening some years ago. I was sitting in one of my favourite spots—a gently sloping bank covered with a thick carpet of moss and shaded by towering beeches. Below in the valley the town lay huddled, with its ever-present haze of smoke over the slate roofs and brick chimneys. Here and there the setting sun was reflected by the glass in the windows of the higher buildings, like huge blood-red eyes in the black body of the town, and all the time a confused clamour of hissing steam, hooting cars, clanking railway waggons and yelling children drifted over the fields and under the beeches on the edge of the forest. As I sat listening, there suddenly arose a sound that seemed utterly alien to all the rest. I listened again. For a few seconds the noises of the town held sway, and then clearly, shrilly, seemingly defiantly, the sound came again. Up from the back streets, piercing the pall of smoke and speeding along the hedgerows, it came again—it was the sound of a cornet—a

collier's cornet playing solo. I knew the words of the song he played. I had heard my father sing them many times—

I sat mid a mighty throng
Within a palace grand,
In a city far beyond the sea
In a distant foreign land—

The occasional gentle puffs of wind played with the notes, sometimes bringing them over the fields in their full strength, sometimes flinging them back into the alleys until I could hardly hear them :

I listened to the grandest strain
My ears had ever heard,
Enraptured, charmed, amazed I was :
My inmost soul was stirred—

I do not know if the tune would be termed “ good music,” nor if the collier was a good player, but to me it was one of the most beautiful incidents in my life, and I have never forgotten it. The title of the song is, I believe, “ The Song that Reached my Heart.”

When, later on, I discovered the identity of the cornet player, I was not disappointed. He was a short, stocky fellow with coloured hands and the blue collier's scars on his face. When I told him of the beauty he had created he grinned behind his three-days' growth of beard and answered : “ Perhaps so ! But ar'm not good enough ter play in t'town band yet.” A player

has to be very good indeed to be a member of a colliers' band.

There is another man whom I know very well, whose music has made me happy on many occasions. He is a hard-bitten old fellow who has spent a lifetime in the pits, except for a few years in the Army during which he went through the Boer War.

When his years of usefulness in the pits were almost at an end, he had a bad accident and to-day he stumps about with an artificial leg, eking out a bare existence by repairing shoes for the neighbours. Sometimes on Saturday night he will bring out his old concertina and, his work-stiffened old fingers working on the keys, make music indeed, whilst his artificial foot stamps on the pavement in time. Jigs, reels, old campaigning songs, hymns—anything at all he will play as requested, and when, later on, the colliers are weary of dancing or singing to his tunes, he will sit on the railings and, caressing the old concertina, he will make it sing of the dreams of his youth, of the sea and adventure, of the fields and villages, and the peace of the country-side. Without pause the tunes follow on, each one seeming to tell some story for which his untrained tongue could never find words :

Then away love away
Away down Rio
So fare ye well
My pretty young gel—

then with suddenly quickening tempo, his head thrown back and the "old gammy leg," as he calls it, stamping on the pavement :

It's the soldiers of the Queen, my lad
Who've been, my lad, who've seen, my lad—

or, with swaying shoulders and head bowed towards his instrument :

For to plow and to sow
And to reap and mow
And be a farmer's boy.

Nobody would call him a musician, but he makes music.

There lived in the town at one time an old collier who had a genius for organising funny competitions in the pub tap-rooms. Whatever pub he was in on a Saturday night, would be in a constant state of uproar. Once he got everybody arguing as to who could shout the loudest. The resultant "shouting competition" was one of the most amusing things I ever came across. Only one competitor did anything, the others were all helpless with laughter. The prize was a half-gallon of beer for the loudest shout—a prize well worth striving for in the eyes of old Charlie, the winner. Taking off his muffler and cap, and loosening his waistcoat, he let out the most fearful bellow. The place seemed to shake with the force of it, and the landlord rushed into the room pale to the lips. His wife, who was just coming

from the bar with a loaded tray, fell in a dead faint, and a policeman who was standing at the street corner came racing up the street quite convinced that murder had been done. It was a long time before anyone managed to hold his laughter long enough to explain, least of all old Charlie. He was busy with the half-gallon of beer. When at last, between the gusts of laughter, somebody managed to explain to the policeman and the scared landlord what all the noise was about, the policeman, knowing his colliers withdrew, smilingly refusing the offer of a swig out of Charlie's can ; whilst the landlord (an old collier himself) endeared himself to the hearts of his customers by remarking : " Well, it's fust time I ivver knowed anybody frighten t'owd lass wi' shoutin'. Ar've nivver bin able ter do it." A few minutes later he entered the tap-room and, with a solemn wink at old Charlie, he proceeded to fill up everybody's pint pot for nothing.


Three years later in a little agricultural village in Lincolnshire I saw (and heard) a competition on exactly the same lines with almost exactly the same results ; only this time everybody concerned took their living from the land. There are few places more calculated to bring happiness to a weary heart than a village tap-room, whether it be in a mining village or an agricultural one.

One of the most interesting men I ever met was old Joe, the ostler at one of the collieries. He

always wore knee breeches and leggings in the true ostler style. He was as much unlike a pit-man as a man could possibly be, and it was strange to see him walking along the pit lane. He loved his pit ponies passionately. When they were brought into the stables at the end of the shift he would examine every inch of them with all-seeing eyes. Not a scratch or mark of any description avoided his keen old eyes, and woe betide a careless pony-driver who had allowed his charge to hurt itself. In the dim lamp-light he would croon to the poor sweating things, calming them and easing their hard lot in many ways. Every day he would carry to the pit a few titbits, carrots from his garden, apples, a pocket-full of green grass, and long before he reached the stables, which were some distance from the pit bottom, the ponies would set up a neighing and stamping to greet him.

When one of his charges was badly injured the old fellow's distress was painful to see. "I'd sooner be 'urt missen," he would say. When the great strike of 1926 was on he was probably the happiest man in the whole of the coalfield, for all his beloved ponies were brought out of the pit and placed in the fields around the pit bank. I heard him many times talking to the animals as if they were children on holiday, his old eyes shining with happiness. Then came reorganisation in the pits. Old Joe was sacked. He was too

old, they told him. I have never forgotten seeing him in the street telling the men about it. "Thi say ar'm too owd," he quavered. "'Ev yer ivver knowd a man be too owd ter 'andle 'orses wot knowed 'im?" He displayed his "notice" paper. "Sacked me thi 'ev!" His old blue eyes were full of tears. "Ar've worked 'ivver since I wor a nipper an' it's the first time ar've ivver bin sacked from a job." To-day the old man wanders the streets like one lost. He has never been idle before, never been away from his "'orses." I know of no sadder sight in the coalfields to-day.



CHAPTER XIII

LAND LOVE

IN the miner there is a deep love of the land that generations of pit work has not destroyed. Around the colliery villages one can always find large stretches of land cut up into allotment gardens and in the early spring there is a sudden awakening of that "land love" which, owing to the few hours of daylight that the miner has at his disposal in the winter months, has been unsatisfied.

In the pubs men argue fiercely over their beer about the respective merits of various kinds of peas or beans. All the successes and failures of last season are discussed and remedies for dealing with greenfly or wireworms exchanged. Each man has a wonderful story to tell of how he had "kidney beans" of prodigious length, or "t'grandest lot er dahlias yer ivver saw in yer life." The length of the beans grows as the number of pints consumed grows, but that doesn't matter, for everybody else has the same chance to tell his story. I have seen vegetable marrows grow to such astonishing proportions on a tap-room table that Sam has had to move the

worker and could always be relied upon to do a job thoroughly, his slow methodical way of working fitted ill with the rush-and-tear method of modern coal mining. The district on which we worked was undergoing a speeding-up process, and although he did not say so, I knew he hated to leave a job half-finished, as he was often made to do. One day he was moved three times in as many hours to different jobs. At the third job he worked steadily for a couple of hours without speaking. Suddenly he seemed to go mad. "Ter hell wi' it," he grated, "Ar've 'ed enough on it." He flung his pick savagely on the roadway. "Rush! rush! rush!" he said, "no time ter do a damned job as it owt ter be done. *Ter hell wi' 'em!*" Then he came to his real grievance. "Up theer," he said, pointing to the roof above him whilst the sweat dropped in big blobs from his elbow to the ground, "up theer, they've spoilt three er t'nicest medders (meadows) yer ivver saw. Covered 'em up wi' stone an' muck they 'ev!" For a few minutes he raged and stormed and his helpless fury was pitiful to see. Some men working near by burst out laughing, not understanding, and this seemed to bring him back to his senses. He glanced around in dazed, foolish sort of way, and there was something infinitely sad in the sag of his sweating body as he bent to take up his pick.

It is not only the men who hear this insistent call of the fields. The women, too, hear it and answer. Young girls just leaving school, and old women who have reared families to serve in the pits, can be found picking potatoes or pulling peas or burning the twitch. Brown as berries, stronger than many men, capable of working from dawn to sunset, they are indeed a reminder of the time when a man's wife was expected to be able to handle a plough or hay-fork when needful. One can detect a field-girl a mile away. They walk differently, talk differently, and, I am convinced, think differently to other women. The weather to them is something more than a spoiler of new hats or the reason for purchasing a flimsy dress. I have watched them emerge from the little hovels and back alleys many times in the early dawn as I have waited for the pit bus, and one would have to be blind to miss seeing that quick glance at the sky and lift of the nostrils as they *smell* the weather that is the hall-mark of the people of the land the world over.

When a woman who has brought up a family of sons and daughters will rise long before her husband and sons, prepare their breakfasts, pack up the "snaps" for those who are on the day shift and walk three or four miles to work in the fields, it needs something more than the fact that she earns perhaps five shillings to explain

the reason why. Her sons will often grumble and threaten to have a day off from the pit, pointing out that there is no necessity for her to do it, but still she will go, for she is hearing a call that is as old as the world, she feels an emotion that is as old as the love of a mother for a child, it can never be wholly drowned by the clamour of industry. A young girl whom I knew very well was persuaded by some well-meaning lady to leave the fields and take a situation in service. She worked through the day very industriously, and the mistress was very pleased indeed. Next morning the girl could be heard moving about the house as soon as day broke. The mistress was delighted to think her maid was such an early riser, but disillusionment soon followed, for when the mistress rose later she found a brief note saying : " Gone to the fields." The land had won again.

I have often wondered what it is that makes pigs so attractive to Englishmen. Of course, they may have the same attraction for foreigners : but never having met any foreigners I don't know about that. When I was a boy the colliers were great pig-keepers, and on Sunday morning I would be out of bed in good time so that I might go out along the backs of the houses to see the pigs.

Ours was a long row, and at the top of every house-garden there was a ramshackle pigsty.

It was the custom of the men, after they had taken their walk through the forest, to amble slowly down the "backs" in groups of four or five, pausing for a time to examine with keen eyes the pigs in each sty. The proud owner of the pig would explain in detail what it had eaten during the last week, how it compared with the previous pig, and so on. "That theer pig," Joe would say, "'as put over aife a stone on sin' last Sunday." The rest of the men would nod wisely as they leaned over the wall, the while they gave the pig the most alarming smacks and prods—not that the animal seemed to mind. The smacks and prods, in some mysterious way, seemed to satisfy everybody that the pig was doing well, and with a few short remarks such as : "It's a grand pig, Joe," or "It's a better pig than't last 'un," the party would pass on to the next sty.

Sometimes an owner would be in great distress because his pig had "gone off its food," or had injured itself, and the expressions of sympathy would be real and feeling ; for very often what little savings a man had were invested in his pig, and the loss of it would be a terrible blow. Suggestions would be made as to how to deal with the situation, men would hurry home to fetch some preparation that had proved beneficial when their own pig had been ill, and regardless of Sunday clothes the men would hold the animal down whilst it was doctored.

I remember those Sunday mornings so well because it was the only time that I could get out on Sundays. In the afternoon everybody had their Sunday clothes on, and I had no Sunday clothes. As I perched on the pigsty wall in the morning sunshine with the smell of pigs and twist tobacco floating up to me, I would listen with great interest to all that was said. I used to think that the height of human happiness must be to own a pig and lean over the wall smoking twist whilst talking with other pig-owners. Perhaps the thought was not so foolish or childish after all. Because if anyone knows of a better picture of contentment and comfort than that of a man leaning over his *own* pigsty wall, talking about his *own* pig to his *own* pals, I should like to hear of it.

To-day there are no pigsties up the "backs." Somebody decided that it was unhealthy to have them there. Perhaps it was. But I often wonder if what was gained in public health compensated for the loss of the good fellowship and understanding of each other that the men found on those Sunday mornings round the pigsty walls.

When the weekly market is held in the town and the local farmers bring in their pigs for sale, one can see, besides the busy buyers and sellers, groups of men walking round carefully examining each pig. They have no money to buy with.

If somebody gave them a pig they would have nowhere to keep it. Yet each week they are there, like the old farm labourer who, when his bones have become too stiff for further work in the fields, must needs stand by the gate to watch other people do it for fear that it won't be done properly. The men stand by and watch.

The modern idea of pig breeding is, of course, wonderfully clean and efficient. "Bacon is better than it used to be," say the experts. I know it is. But I also know that Joe no longer brings a pork pie down to the pub for the chaps to taste, and that poor old Charlie who has been "off work" for so long doesn't get a nice "fry" from Joe after the killing.

I once met a charming young lady artist who was busy painting scenes of my Sherwood. During our conversation she suddenly asked: "Have you any pigs around here?" I looked at her in surprise. I wouldn't have thought that such a pretty creature had ever thought of such things. "Why?" I asked. "Well," she said, "if you have any, I should like to see them." I thought she was trying to "pull my leg" a bit, and so kept quiet for a time. She worked away at her canvas for a few moments and then, suddenly glancing up, she remarked: "I think that pigs are lovely things"—and she was not "pulling my leg." I am not going to say that pigs are lovely things, but I will say this, that

much beauty left the "backs" when the pigs went, and I suppose that that amounts to the same thing in the long run.

In his love of sport, or games of any description, the miner, I always feel, gives ample evidence of his close relationship to the country people in the surrounding agricultural villages. Cricket in particular seems to draw the English characteristics to the surface. It might do the sportsmen who whine about body-line bowling a lot of good if they would spend a little time watching miners play the game. They play it on the rough fields and stretches of waste ground, as it was played on the village greens many years ago, when it was not considered a crime to bowl for the leg stump. The spectacle of a young miner dressed in pit clothes and heavy hob-nailed boots, with the grime of the pit still on his face, standing nonchalantly at the wicket whilst the bowler sends murderous full-tosses or shorter-pitched balls that get up off the rough ground at all angles, would turn many lovers of the grand game faint with apprehension.

They naturally adopt that curious attitude, a mixture of indifference and determination which one cannot explain, and which always seems to me to be the Englishman's attitude towards anything that he loves. Just in the same way that the batsman on the village green is apparently more interested in the horses grazing in

the far corner, so the miner will pause at the wicket to observe critically a stray dog. Then, as he takes his stance and gives that little lift of the head which indicates his readiness to carry on with the game, his whole body tenses, his face sets into a look of intense concentration, as if this was the only thing in the world that mattered for him. As the ball rises wickedly, he plays it gracefully as if it was the most boring business in the whole world.

I once spent a whole Saturday afternoon watching what I fondly imagined to be a match between two colliery teams who were very close rivals. When the game was almost over I went round to the other side of the ground where the spectators had congregated in order to inquire which team was which. I found that I had made a mistake in the dates, and that I had been watching two local village teams composed mainly of farmers and gardeners. I had not noticed any difference in the attitude of the players towards the game.

Horse-racing, too, brings out the national characteristics of the miner in a most interesting way. What Englishman does not love horses? Contrary to the general belief, I have always felt that it is not purely for the sake of gambling that the men take such an interest in racing. I know men who have never been nearer to a real race-horse than the rail side on the free course

at Doncaster who can tell you more about a particular horse's breeding than most people who frequent the more expensive parts of the course. Start one of them off by mentioning some famous horse like St. Simon or The Tetrarch and the amount of knowledge he will display is astonishing. Ever since I was a boy I have taken a delight in starting discussions amongst them on the subject. For they speak of horses as if they loved them. They will walk miles in order to watch hounds meet or to attend some small point-to-point meeting. There is about a meet something wholly English that has never failed to thrill and excite me : it thrills and excites the miners who walk miles to see it too. Men who have never in their lives bestrode a horse, let alone owned one, are as much bothered about "scent" or "finding" as the master of the hunt himself, and when the hunt moves off, leaving the men standing there, in their eyes there shines a mixture of happiness and pride that leaves no doubt in the mind of the watcher as to their ancestry. On one occasion I attended a point-to-point meeting at a village in our neighbourhood. There I saw a display of English "phlegm" (I believe that is the word) that was well worth walking the eight miles to the course to see. There was the usual collection of gentry, farmers and their labourers present, and, in addition, a number of miners along with the race-course riff-raff always to be found where

there might be some pickings. Things were quite peaceful—according to racing standards, that is—until the bookmakers were paying out on the next to the last race, and then the fun began. One miner, who was on the small side and quite inoffensive, had won two or three pounds. Amongst the crowd there was a party of so-called race-course toughs and they had been watching the little fellow draw his money. Making a ring round him in order to keep other people away, they grabbed hold of his arms and began to go through his pockets. Instead of struggling or fighting he let out a yell that could be heard all over the course: “Sam! Bill! Coom up ’ere a minnit!” Sam and Bill were two bosom pals, big, raw-boned, hard as the coal they hewed and notorious for their ability to poach, fight and generally misbehave themselves. They came up the side of the course at the double, paused on the fringe of the crush to take off their coats and throw them on the ground, and then they entered the fray. It was a glorious sight and I was beside myself with excitement as I perched on the wheel of a farmer’s trap to watch it. Side by side they went through the crowd like a farmer through the corn. With fists flailing they made their way to the little man and in less time than it takes to tell, they had picked him up and received a hurried explanation of the cause of the trouble. By this time the toughs had

recovered from the first onslaught and were gathering their forces for an attack. Sam took in the situation at a glance, rolled up his sleeves, and then, as if suddenly remembering it, turned and threw a coin to the bookmaker, calling as he did so : " Put us a bob on't favourite, Joey, while I'm 'ere." It was not with any idea of showing off that he did it ; men like Sam have no need to show off. When the bet had been booked, the little miner was placed in the middle and once again with fists flying they forged their way through the crowd until they reached their coats. By that time many more miners had arrived on the scene, all eager to join in the " rough house," but the toughs had wisely fled, and a minute or so later, when the police came on the scene, Sam and Bill had also discreetly withdrawn to another part of the course.

The favourite did not win, and later as we walked home together I heard Sam telling the little man that it hadn't been a bad day, " but," he said with a twinkle, " if it 'eddn't a bin for thee gerrin' inter a scrap, ar might 'ev 'ed a shillin' left for a couple er pints." Sam, pausing in the fight to put his shilling on a horse, reminds me irresistibly of the poem that I learned from my books :

" He was playing at Plymouth a rubber of bowls
When the great Armada came,
But he said, ' They must wait their turn good souls,'
And he stooped and finished the game."

CHAPTER XIV

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

IT is well that the miner is so keenly interested in his garden or pigeons or sport, for sometimes the conditions in the pit are so cruel and brutal that he becomes almost inhuman in his reactions to those conditions. He is for a time a different person. The first time that I saw a set of men working in a bad "stall" I shall never forget. Naked as the day they were born, muscles rippling under skin wet with sweat and black with coal dust as they furiously hacked at the stubborn coal. Filthy water over their boot-tops and raining down from the roof on to their backs as they worked. Lamps swinging on bars and props sending strange black twisted shadows of the men dancing along the stall. Horrible curses from the men, curses that one never hears on the surface, and over the whole stall an atmosphere of intense savagery that belongs only to the pit. As I waited in the "gate" with my pony for the men to bring out their tubs of coal, I became thrilled with it all. Every curse was a defiance of the danger, every swing of the pick was a blow struck for men against nature, every

lump of coal that came crackling off the "face" was a trophy to be swiftly thrown into a tub and borne away. I wanted to go in and help in the fight. I edged closer hoping to be told to help in loading the fallen coal. A large piece of coal suddenly burst away from the face, the man working at it nimbly skipped away, but not quite nimbly enough, and the razor-like edge of it scraped along his naked leg, removing a large portion of skin. He cursed horribly, but paid little attention to his hurt, and as he continued to paddle about in the filthy water the blood trickled down into the top of his boot.

My enthusiasm for a collier's life began to wane as swiftly as it had grown. I watched him work for ten minutes longer, imagining all the time he must be in dreadful pain, particularly with the dirty salt water splashing over the wound. The man lapsed into silence for a time and I thought he was feeling ill. Then abruptly he turned to the man working next to him and said : "Wot did yer say thi called them little blue flowers?"

Tears are rare things in colliery towns and villages. Colliers and their wives seldom cry. I sometimes wish they did cry occasionally, for the sight of a woman's face when her man or her son is brought home from the pit injured is one that haunts the mind for a long time afterwards. I have seen them so many times as they

have met the sweating party of men carrying a husband or son—no excitement, no fluttering around the stretcher, no fainting, no tears. Just the question, "Is it very bad?" The muscles of the face set in hard lines, the lips drawn tight together and the voice as steady as it was when the man started off for the day's work. But it is in the eyes that a man dare not look. When I was a tiny child that look in the eyes of an injured man's wife sent me screaming home in fear. One cannot describe it in words. Newspaper reporters describe it as "a hopeless look," but it is more than that. It is a concentration of all the things that a woman can feel and it makes men wilt before it. I have seen rough men who have joked and cursed as they carried a man in the pit, stricken dumb when the woman met them in the street or at the cottage door. "Ar wouldn't care a damn if the blasted wimmin 'ud cry sometimes," said an old ambulance man whose job it was to see injured men safely home. "It's them eyes that frightens me." Nobody asked him what he meant, everybody knew.

I have said that mining folk are at times strangely sentimental. A stranger might describe them as being almost mawkish in their sentiment. But there are no tears at such times. It is as if they have realised that the pit must be faced with the same harshness as it metes out; that if once they bend the pit will crush them body and soul.

The only sign of feeling shown is a softening of the harsh pit-voices and a haunting sadness in the songs they sing. When I was a child their songs, as they sat at the street corners on Saturday night, always made me cry.

The "Corner Boys" were great boys for a sing-song. They would sing until the small hours of Sunday morning and I would lie awake in the back bedroom listening to them. In perfect time and beautiful harmony, yet without any conducting, these young men whom the more respectable people of the town looked upon as toughs, would send their songs echoing through the dingy "backs" and out beyond to the fields and woods, whilst the older colliers lay in their beds remembering the time when they too could stay up all hours without being weary. A song that was a great favourite with them, and one that carries the thoughts back to the days when the swearing devil-may-care "Corner Boys" left the "Corner" never to return, is :

"Homeland, Homeland,
When shall I see thee again?
Land of my birth,
The dearest place on earth,
I'm leaving you. . . ."

You remember it I feel sure. Perhaps not much of a tune. Perhaps not much of a song at all, but the lads who willingly exchanged their tin

bottles for knapsacks and their picks for rifles thought it a grand song.

Sometimes when the usual Saturday night sing-song is being held in the pub this old tune can be heard once more in the back alleys, and it seems as if the "Corner Boys" have found their way back to the "Corner" and are once more seated on the kerb wearing their cloth caps and fancy mufflers, and one hardly dares to look along the street toward the old "Corner" as the song dies away :

" It may be for years,
And it may be for ever,
Dear Homeland, Good-bye."

I have just been reading in a daily newspaper an article in which the Notts and Derby Regiment is described as "one of those 'storming' regiments." The "Corner Boys" were all in the Notts and Derby Regiment, or Notts and Jots as they preferred to call it. It would be a "storming" regiment all right. Reckless, cursing, rough, loyal, devoid of fear and laughing in the face of death just as they had learned to be in the pit. I have no doubt whatever that it was a storming regiment.

Once, before the War, a large number of Territorials were camped near the town. I think they were the Lincolns, but I am not sure. Late one night the "Corner Boys," out of sheer devilment, gathered their forces and "raided"

the camp and there was a fearful mix-up. The camp was situated on a large stretch of open land which was practically surrounded by the forest, and the poor "Terriers," although outnumbering the "Corner Boys" by hundreds, could do very little, because the raiders knew the woods like the backs of their hands and kept disappearing, only to pop out near another part of the camp. In the early morning I stood at my bedroom window with my brothers and saw the triumphant return of the "storming party." They marched down the street, two deep, headed by the band—two mouth organs—carrying the spoils of war—buckets, cooking-tins, caps, bayonets, and in one case a rifle.

A few minutes later there was a sound of hurrying feet in the street and we hastily jumped out of bed to see the fun. It was the vengeful "Terriers" hot on the trail of the "Storming party." But the "Corner" was silent and deserted, and lying on the pavement, neatly arranged, were the trophies of war.

I used to love to hear my father tell stories of the pits in the days when he was a young man. There was one, that no matter how often it was told, never failed to enthrall me: Once when working in one of the old Derbyshire pits he had with him two mates, one young and strong like himself, and the other old and rather weak on his legs. The old man was so lame that they

used to let him start off towards the pit bottom at the shift-end some time before they went themselves, and they would stay behind to finish his work for him.

One day as they worked at the coal face, the air which should have been cool seemed to be getting warm, and they were at a loss to explain it. For some time they kept on working, but the air grew so hot that they decided it was time to investigate. The two young ones walked out on to the main road, there to be met with a blast of fiercely hot air that dried the sweat on their bodies. "God Almighty!" said father's mate, "the pit is on fire," and they were well over half a mile from the pit bottom. Stripped as they were, they began to make toward the shaft as fast as they could go along the narrow road.

Suddenly they heard a voice, faint and gasping, a long way behind them—"Bill! Jack!—For God's sake don't leave me." It was the old man, who in their momentary panic they had forgotten. They went back for him. The air was choking hot, and thick with smoke, but they went back.

The old man was in a sorry state and could hardly walk at all, so without further ado they put him into a tub and raced to the shaft bottom pushing the tub in front of them. When they arrived at the pit bottom they found that it was a building on the pit top that had caught

fire, and the heat and smoke was being drawn down the shaft into the workings.

As they walked home through the fields in the grey morning they all three chuckled over the adventure. The old man crowed with delight at the thought of the two "young ones" having given him a ride all the way to the pit bottom. Father always told the story because of the laugh at the end, but I always pictured in my mind the two black, naked young men who went back for an old man, and took the chance, for all they knew, of being roasted alive hundreds of feet below ground.

The almost indifferent attitude of a miner to the danger of falling stone might to some extent be explained by the old saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt," but it wouldn't explain the reason why those two young men went back to fetch a mate, nor would it explain the spirit that sends the members of a rescue team into the awful dangers of a pit after an explosion, such as happened in Yorkshire a few years ago, or at Gresford quite recently.

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Occasionally a stranger from the nearby city will turn up in the pub tap-room and it is both interesting and amusing to watch what happens. The superior attitude often adopted by city-bred people towards the men of the pit villages

is a constant source of irritation to miners. I remember one particular instance when a stranger was throwing out a challenge to play anybody in the place at "Dominoes." Now, miners take their Dominoes seriously, as this particular stranger found out before closing time.

I had just brought into the pub for a drink an old miner whom I had known for many years, and who had a reputation for playing a good game of Dominoes. He took up the challenge of the stranger at once and for the rest of the night continued to play.

As we walked home together after closing time the old chap paused under a street lamp to count his money. "Not so bad," said he in great satisfaction, "not so bad. Ar've got seven-an'-tenpence ter last me t'week." I looked at him in surprise, for I had carefully watched the play, and I had reckoned his winnings to be seven-and-tenpence. I knew that the first game had been played for a shilling stake too. "Hadn't you any money when you played that first game?" I asked. "Naw," he answered off-handedly, "an' ar didn't need any money ter play yon chap." He had calmly undertaken to play the stranger for a shilling without having a copper in his pocket.

The stranger from the city would be considerably chastened by the loss of seven-and-tenpence no doubt, but I have often wondered

what he would have thought if he had known all the facts.

Very often, as I worked in the pit, I heard a man warn another to be careful under a piece of bad roof, and I always wanted to laugh. I have never been able to find out what a miner means by "being careful." Once in the early years of my pit life I had the job of "running tubs" into a very bad "stall," and the "stallman" pointed out a portion of roof which was badly broken. "Be careful," he said. As I had to pass under the bad roof every few minutes I decided that the best thing to do was to run past the spot as quickly as possible. This I continued to do for the biggest part of the shift, but finally, as I raced under, a piece of stone about the size of an orange fell and caught me a terrific whack on the top of my head. I ran to the "stallman," rubbing my head and feeling very sorry for myself. "Damn yer," he said, "Ar told yer ter be careful." I looked at him in surprise. "What else could I do beside running past the place?" I asked. He looked a bit nonplussed for a moment, and then with great gravity he said: "Tha could be more careful."

I have seen men working calmly under the most fearful-looking pieces of stone that seemed to be on the verge of falling, but I knew better than to attempt to warn them. They know

when a roof is dangerous and they are always careful.

Only once did I draw a man's attention to the danger of the roof. He was an old stoneman more than twice my age, and had spent practically all his life in the pit. He made a great show of examining the large stone which I said was unsafe, and then, turning to me, he said : " That can't fall, lad," and after a pause, " there's nowt ter stop it."

There is nothing that a miner resents more than the suggestion that he does not know his job. A man has to know his job in the pit or his career is very soon cut short.

I am afraid that I too frequently lose my temper when speaking to strangers about miners and mining life. So many people show such an appalling ignorance of what is undoubtedly the most important industry (except, of course, agriculture) in the country—not that the average miner troubles about being misunderstood, he doesn't. He gets a great deal of amusement out of it at times.

I often wonder if newspaper reporters realise how much amusement the miners get out of the pathetic articles on miners and mining that appear occasionally in the newspapers. If they (the reporters) could hear the chuckles of amusement, or, sometimes, the expressions of disgust, as someone who has probably never been nearer

the coal face than the manager's office talks of "digging for coal," as if it was dug out of the earth like clay out of a clay pit, they would use the correct term. Coal is not *dug* out of the earth ; it is "got " or " cut " or hewed, and " getting " coal means striking and hacking for hours on end, sometimes for a few hundredweights. Then again, they will persist in talking about " going down into the bowels of the earth." No doubt it sounded all right at one time, but I do wish they would think of something new. If a reporter could hear the howl of laughter as some waggish collier sings out when the cage just begins to descend : " We will now go down into the bowels of the earth," he would feel more than a little foolish.

The easiest way to make a miner laugh is to tell him that you have been down a mine to look round. He knows what you saw during that look round. He knows that the route upon which you were led by the guiding official was carefully chosen beforehand. Visitors very seldom see the bad parts of the mine : they are taken along the main roads which nowadays are steel ringed, whitewashed and perfectly safe, and are invariably shown the best portion of the coal face. When I worked in the pit it was part of my duty as pit corporal to spread the news when anybody strange was coming. Every miner knows also that much of the inspection carried

out by H.M. Inspectors is purely farcical. This, of course, is not the fault of the inspectors, who are always very keen and efficient men, and can be very nasty indeed, both to officials and men, when they do find neglect. When the inspector is expected at a colliery there is great activity in all parts of the pit. Bad roof is hurriedly timbered, manholes are made the regulation size, stallmen are warned to set up the requisite number of props, haulage hands are warned against breaking rules and by the time the inspector arrives everything is spick and span. If he tries to make a surprise visit he is beaten by the telephone, and every part of the mine is buzzing with the news that there is an inspector coming, long before he lands on the sump boards in the pit bottom.

All this is the superficial outside of a miner's work. There is another side. During the rescue operations after a terrible explosion that took place in a Yorkshire mine recently, an uncle of mine was penetrating into the devastated workings along with a rescue team. Somewhere in the reeking workings were the bodies of many mates, and the team was straining every nerve and taking fearful risks in their attempt to find the bodies.

As they advanced slowly through the smoke and gas, orders were given, and obeyed implicitly. Each man knew that sudden death in the shape

of another explosion might leap out of the darkness in front of them at any moment. Suddenly there was an ominous growl, and quickly following it a small explosion. The team turned as one man and fled. After going at full speed for a few yards and finding that they were still whole, they stopped, crouched down in a circle and looked at each other. The oldest man of the team calmly surveyed the rest for a few seconds, and then drily remarked : " Nobody towd us ter run, did they ? " The men howled with laughter at the old man's words. Picture the scene—the men with their weird-looking rescue apparatus strapped to their backs, the clouds of smoke drifting past in the faint gleam of the lamps, and with all the knowledge that death still hovered over them even as they laughed. What manner of men are these miners that can laugh in the face of calamity and death ? One might almost be forgiven for thinking that they were hard and callous, and that the death of a pal is nothing to them, but it is not so. Else why did those same men return to that inferno time after time ? Why did they strain and tear at the fallen stone until they fell exhausted and were carried to the surface only to be begging within a few hours to be allowed to descend again to help in the search for their mates ? I think that I know why. It is because they have learned the true lesson of life through adversity—Love thy

neighbour as thyself. In the blackness of the pit they have found a light greater than that of the sun of which they are deprived for a great part of their lives. In the truest sense of the word, they are men, and if they die Godless, as many of them do, I believe that God must forgive them because they were *men*.

CHAPTER XV

FATHER

ALL my life I have looked up to my father. To me he was all that a father could possibly be. Standing six feet in height, tremendously broad across the shoulders and walking with a rolling gait strangely like that of a sailor—a thing which frequently caused people to ask if he had been a sailor in his youth—he was indeed a most wonderful person in my childish eyes.

Sometimes when I had managed to obtain a copper by running errands for the neighbours, I could purposely buy those little hard nuts which one can always see piled up in the windows of the small shops in mining towns, and taking them home I would ask him to crack them for me. With his bare hands he would crush them, two or three at a time. Nobody else's father in the street could do that and I used to boast of it to other children. Those hands were large and as hard as iron, and to me there was something frightening yet thrilling in their strength. Yet when occasion demanded they could be very gentle. I remember how I once lay night after night during an illness waiting for him to come

up to my bedside because he would carefully feel my forehead, thinking that I was asleep.

He could tell stories, too—funny little stories that nobody else ever seemed to think of about kings and queens and the history of England. They never quite agreed with the stories told by other grown-ups about the same people, but his kings and queens were always much more real ; they did things which the people in the street did ; they had passions, hatreds, love of certain foods, and things like that. He said that one king was very fond of beef, and because he once enjoyed a meal of beef he knighted the joint, saying, “ I knight thee, Sir Loin.” I never knew whether the story was true or not, but I loved to hear him tell it. I think he made up many stories for my benefit, but true or not they made the kings of England more real to me than they could ever have been had I been forced to judge them by the hopelessly inadequate school history books.

Sometimes surprisingly he would say a few lines of poetry and I would beg for more. We must have made a strange picture at times—he with his face shiny black seated at the supper table, me standing as close as I could without getting dirty by touching his grimy pit clothes, whilst with his fork poised in the air he would declaim :

“ Dark lightning flashed from Roderick’s eye.

‘ Soars your presumption then so high ?

Think ye because mis’able kern ye slew,

Homage to name to Roderick Dhu ? ’ ”

or, stripped to the waist after washing himself in the back kitchen, and with his great muscles rippling as he dried himself with the rough towel before the fire :

“ The Consul’s brow was sad
And the Consul’s speech was low,
And darkly looked he at the bridge
And darkly at the foe. . . .”

He had a pretty good singing voice, too, and he knew more songs than any man I ever knew. He would sing a comic song and send me off into roars of laughter, or, with real feeling in his voice, he would sing some beautiful old English song and reduce me to tears.

I believe that unknowingly my father taught me many things which all through my life have compensated amply for the misery caused by his unflinching adherence to his principles. All his fighting and agitating was done because he sincerely believed it was for the best in the long run, and I could never, when I think of the unhappiness of my childhood, lay it at his door. I cannot forget that many times he went to the pit without a bite of “ snap ” so that I might have something to eat during the day. That he could have been more wisely led, and that frequently he has been used merely as a tool for others, I am well aware, but his courage cannot be denied. I once heard him called a fool (not to his face though). Perhaps he was a fool, but like

Brutus, he was a brave fool and was prepared to suffer for his foolishness.

Everybody in the town knew him and was friendly to him, from the police superintendent down to the old fellow who came round selling pins and cotton. He was "Bill" to them all—even the superintendent. Once as I was walking down the street with him we met "The Super," as he was popularly known. "Hello, Bill," he said, "What's going to win the big race?" Father was a recognised authority on that subject too, and "The Super," one of the best loved and respected men who ever lived amongst the miners, was, if rumour did not lie, not averse to having his shilling on when the information was good. The miner loves a "sport" beyond all men, and to-day in the pubs "the Super," who has been dead many years, is spoken of with a respect that few men receive after their death. Father was always doing astonishing things like that. During one strike a number of men were prosecuted for taking wood from the forest and after a time nobody dared to go for any more wood. Early one morning he set off toward the forest with his axe and saw me trotting behind, terrified that he would be "locked up" if anyone saw him in the forest. Soon we came to a fallen tree and he took off his coat in preparation to lop off a few branches. To my horror I saw the much feared wood-steward approaching and whispered the

news to father. "Oh," he said, "ar wanted ter see 'im." Then turning to the wood-steward with a disarming smile, he said, "Good morning, ar don't suppose yer've any objection ter me tekkin' a bit of firewood, ev yer?" To my amazement and relief the wood-steward smiled—actually smiled!—and replied, "No, take what you want. You can have the whole tree if you need it, Bill." As I have said before, father was "Bill" to everybody.

Father's coat pockets were both exciting and interesting. I loved to delve into them (whilst he was at work, of course), for he had many interests and his pockets contained all sorts of little books and papers concerning those interests. Racing Form and Handicap books, sporting records, Union rule-books, political pamphlets, parliamentary debates, all much used and pencil marked, and all jumbled together in any sort of order. Woe betide anybody who dared to remove any of them, for he was constantly referring to them when arguments cropped up in the pub over the way.

One of the things which he always kept in his pocket intrigued me a great deal. It was a photograph of a man. I secretly thought it was some rich uncle whom I had never heard of and for a long time I pondered over his identity. At length I plucked up courage to ask him about the photograph, although I knew I was giving

away the fact that I had been delving in his pockets. For a time he lectured me severely about prying in other people's pockets, and then, taking the photograph out, he said: "That's one of t'straightest men that England ivver produced. If we 'ed a few more like 'im things 'ud be a lot better. It's Bonar Law."—And father was, and is to-day, a Socialist.

Many times since then I have noticed the inconsistency of the miner's brand of Socialism. It is a very different thing to that which is constantly preached in his political meetings, and by the soap-box orators of the street corners. At one time speakers would attempt to infuse enthusiasm for Socialism into the men by referring to the amount of money spent annually on Royalty; but after a few years they ceased to make any reference to it, because, in great contrast to most things said by the speakers, such references were invariably received coldly. The late King Edward VII is still spoken of by the older miners who lived during his reign with a respect that is wonderful to hear. Perhaps the simplest, yet grandest epitaph for a great king was uttered by an old miner (a great Socialist friend of my father's) during a discussion on horse-racing which had cropped up whilst the men waited on the pit bank for their turn to descend. Reference had been made to many famous figures of the turf and each had received

his share of praise, but when somebody who had been present on that famous occasion when the King of England led in his Derby winner, mentioned it, the old miner said, "Ar! nar 'e war a sport, liked 'is bit er 'oss-racin', owd Teddy did!" Spoken as it was, in the rough dialect of the pits and with such obvious sincerity, I believe that it would have delighted the heart of "sportin' Teddy" more than all the cheers which are the lot of kings.

On the surface the miner may appear to be a Socialist. He will attend the meetings, sing "The Red Flag" and applaud the fiery speeches; yet deep down inside him there still remains that stubborn love of things English which prevents him from becoming the whole-hearted Socialist that agitators would have him become.

Perhaps one of the ways in which my father shows most clearly to the casual observer how English he really is is in his love of a pint (or two) of good beer. I should imagine that there are few better judges of beer than father. Englishmen have funny little ways which I always think would betray their origin wherever they might be, particularly when drinking beer. They have a peculiar habit of peeping down into the pot just before they drink, in a doubting sort of way. Then, slowly raising the pot and at the same time lowering the head, they take

a small drink. For a few seconds after the first sip they pause with the pot still in the air, whilst into their eyes there comes a look of concentration. For a very brief space of time they seem to be utterly oblivious of their surroundings, and then having got the feeling of the beer, they swiftly take a larger drink and set the pot down. I have watched father drink many pints of beer, and his movements never vary. Most of the colliers do exactly the same thing, and so do farmers. Perhaps beer, and the drinking of it, may seem to be a very trivial thing to write about, but I hold it is a very important thing in our national life. I have seen much happiness in the tap-rooms where men have for a time been able to forget the grind of the pit in good company. I know that my father would not be the man he is to-day if he had not sought the company of his fellow-men around the pots of beer in the tap-rooms. One hears a lot about the curse of drink, but if some of the people who advocate the total abolition of drink had to earn their living in the mines they might change their views. Of drinks other than beer I know nothing at all—few colliers do—but about beer I know plenty. I know that it is an English drink; that it has been an English drink for many generations, and that, being as English as all that, it cannot be such a bad thing. The colliers love it because they are real Englishmen in

every way. My father loves his pints of beer ; so do I.

Sometimes he would come home from the pit weary and sodden and then his stories would be bitter. He would talk of the days when women and children worked in the pits dragging the buckets of coal along the dark roadways. He would tell of the slums built during the industrial revolution and the awful misery of the people who inhabited them. At such times I would be afraid of life and of what it held in store for me. If people could be as cruel as that—and they must have been, because my father knew everything—then there was little to want to grow up for. I used to lie in bed and ask God to keep me away from the pits.

When during the long winter evenings, as the damp fog hung in the alleys between the ash-pits and the street lamps only served to make things even more desolate as they gleamed faintly through the fog, showing the rusty iron railings and cracked doors of houses, I stood waiting for father to come up the street, it seemed as if nothing could ever be clean and nice like the woods. But often father would come up the street whistling or joking with the other men and I would run to meet him because he would let me carry his big tin water-bottle. The other men would laugh and say, "Hello ! Young Bill," and I would be proud because they knew I was the

son of "Big Bill"—"Big Bill" whom I had heard men say could swing a hammer with a precision and force which had to be seen to be believed—"Big Bill" who could be relied upon to fill in any sort of paper or weigh up the chances of the favourite of the St. Leger or lend a man a shilling if he had one to lend—I was proud to be known as "Young Bill."

There is, about colliery life, something which brings fathers and sons very close together, but in a different way. There is a sort of friendship and understanding between them which is unlike that of any other walk of life. To the stranger a young miner might seem to be sadly lacking in that respect which one expects a son to have for his father. Frequently a young man addresses his father as "Tom," or "Fred," just as he would a pal of his own age, and I have seen strangers stare in surprise at such times. The reason for this unusual attitude of fathers and sons to each other lies not in disrespect, but in a greater respect because of their knowledge of each other gained in the pits. A father will often be in charge of a "stall" in which two or three of his sons are working, and in the pit one sees one's father or brother or son as a *man*, not as a relative. The hard life of the pit tests a man, his weaknesses are clearly seen as also is his strength and courage. When one has seen one's father naked and sweating at the coal face,

one realises the debt which one owes to him for having been brought up to manhood a fit person to take a place by his side.

There is no cheap sentiment about the miner's family life : theirs is a deep understanding of each other—an understanding which endures and grows with each " shift " in the pits. I have seen my father in the pit, and I know that I could never be the man that he was in his younger days. He has seen me in the pit and *he* knows that too. We don't have to pretend to each other at all and I think it is better so.

To-day my father is finished with the pits. His eyes have failed him. Years of work in the pits, with only the feeble glow of his lamp to show him the dangers of bad roofs and the like, have almost blinded him. The pit that he served for a lifetime with all his great strength and skill, having failed to destroy him by crashing stone or exploding gas, has thrown him out on to the scrap-heap half-blind—and he has returned to the land. One could see, from the moment he finished in the pit, what was going to happen. For years he had resisted the call of the land in serving the pit, but her call is stronger, older, more insistent, and in the end she has taken back one more of her own. Day after day he spends on his allotment garden. Winter and summer alike he is off to the garden in the early morning, returning only as night falls. Sometimes the

weather is too bad for working in the garden, but he goes just the same, and for hours on end he just sits and watches things. What there is to watch when the cold north Midland fogs are covering the land I have never been able to discover, but he does it, and all the other miner-gardeners do it. They have little sheds made of odd bits of wood, corrugated iron, old linoleum and anything else that they can find. Inside there will be a couple of old chairs which have long since ceased to be of any use in the home, but patched up and covered with old bags they are surprisingly comfortable, particularly when the old stove, fashioned with much patient labour from old oil drums, is roaring away in one corner of the shed.

The men are very proud of their sheds, and a visitor, even if it is only the chap from the next allotment, will always be given the best seat, nearest the stove. When a man wins a prize in a show he always takes the card on which the particulars are given and sticks it up in the shed ; some of them have dozens of cards and if you aren't very careful they will start off at the first and tell you the full history of each one.

I know that my father is happier to-day, in spite of shortage of money and difficulty in getting his Saturday night pint or two, than ever he was before. The land has claimed him, and she wants all his time. Sometimes she serves him

shabbily, giving him little or no return for all the care he lavishes on her, and then he grumbles, as all who love the land grumble. Into his voice there creeps exactly the same tone that the farmer uses for his grumbles. There is no other grumble like it. Father bemoaning his dried-up pea-rows and the old farmer on the other side of the hedge lamenting over his scorched turnips, are one and the same man. I have noticed many times that as a man's love for his garden grows greater his love for politics of the extreme type grows less. It has happened so often with men whom I have known for many years, that I was forced to notice it. The two things just don't go together somehow. I think I know why, too. For years the miner lives savagely, fighting for the necessities of life in unnatural surroundings where a mistake means death or injury. If his wage is inadequate the only way to improve it is by fighting and going hungry. Naturally he chooses the most destructive weapons—Socialism and the like—to aid him in the fight, knowing all the time that those weapons are far from being the ideal ones for the job. He can't be blamed for it either. He is only what industry has made him after all. But when the land calls and her voice is heard above the noise of the pits, Socialism begins to look rather foolish in the miner's eyes. Few of the men who cultivate allotments attend political meetings. They have more important

things to attend to. Politics are mostly promises. Spring is certain to come. Trade Unions often fail to bring anything. Autumn always delivers something worth while. I don't know whether I have made myself clear to everybody on this point, but I think that every man or woman who has tended a garden, no matter how small, will understand.


When father brings home a basket of greens or a half-sack of potatoes, he displays more genuine pride in them than ever he did in his weekly wage from the pit. The money was only the same kind as that brought by many other miners, but when he brings peas or beans or potatoes—well, every gardener knows that they have a flavour of their own.

Just as in the case of horse-racing or politics, father has quickly become something of an authority amongst the allotment holders and has been elected on to the allotments committee. He has gone back to the land wholeheartedly.

If all this seems to the reader like a specially written pæan of praise for my father, I would like to remove that impression. Father is a typical collier, his counterparts can be found in any colliery village in this part of the country, and it is because I believe that such men can ill be spared or lost to England that I have spent so much time in presenting him to the reader.

I think that father always knew that I should

be a rebel from his Socialism and Trades Unionism, and to-day, though we are in opposing political camps, he thinks none the less of me. Just as I admire him for his courage in fighting and suffering for the cause which he believes in, so does he give me credit for having thought for myself. We have both suffered and fought—he many more years than I. His fighting days are almost over and from the hurly-burly of industry he has turned to the soil for peace. I have many years of fighting still before me, perhaps years of poverty, still to endure. Perhaps I shall see men turn and betray those who raised them to power, as he has done, and be strong enough to go on fighting for those ideals which, even though they may differ in some ways, were born of his own. If in later years I can turn from the fighting to the land with that serenity of mind which is his to-day, I shall feel that I have acquitted myself as a worthy son of “Big Bill.”



CHAPTER XVI

UNEMPLOYED

IT was in 1932 that I first became unemployed. I could not say that I was terribly upset when I received my notice. Things were not too bad at first. I had got a decent little home together and we were fairly well-off for clothes and shoes. But after a time the clothes began to get a bit shabby, the shoes began to wear down at the heels, and my little daughter, who had always had the best I could possibly provide, had to have things not quite so good. Gradually things became worse ; we had to manage without many things to which we had been accustomed. Life became a round of hateful sameness. A bit of bacon and a few tinned tomatoes on Friday when I drew the dole, then all the week through until Friday came again a constant procession of corned beef, cheap jam, margarine and potatoes. What a benefit the great explorer gave to the poor when he introduced potatoes into the country ! They fill a man up. They make him feel that he has had a good meal and that things are not so bad after all. Our portion went from bad to worse. I began to brood and

lie awake at night. The long monotonous days with nothing to do were maddening and I envied the men who still had their jobs in the pits. It was useless to look for work, it was useless to do anything at all. For a time I lost all sight of beauty or decency, I became surly and uncivil. Sometimes we were without a scrap of food in the house, but we never told anyone. One evening, just as the light was fading, I stole out of the house, across the fields to where a large patch of potatoes grew, and digging with my fingers into the earth I uncovered half a dozen big potatoes. As I returned with my pockets bulging, the form of the farmer suddenly appeared before me in the half-light. I knew him to be a decent old chap who would willingly have given me the potatoes had I asked him, but notwithstanding I was suddenly filled with a black hatred of him. He had plenty ; I had nothing. If he attempted to stop me I would throttle him. He came close up to me, peering into my face ; slowly his glance passed from my face to my bulging pockets. I clenched my hands in awful rage, preparing to smash him to the ground. He was an old man and I was young and hard, but one takes little notice of things like that when the madness that comes from unemployment takes hold of one.

He began to speak, and I half crouched in readiness to strike him : " It's bin a grand day,

lad," he said. "Ar, it's bin grand," I answered, still suspecting him. "Are yer out of work?" he went on. "Ar," I answered. "Well," said the old man, "come up ter t'farm in t'morning an' yer can 'ave aif a bag of spuds." I went home ashamed.

On another occasion, having become desperate because of my inability to provide my child with proper food, I decided to try my hand at poaching. My knowledge of the forest and of the art of poaching would, I knew, enable me to tackle the job successfully.

One evening, having fashioned several "snickles," I stole out of the house and made my way to the forest. "Snickles" are simply loop knots attached to a wooden peg. The peg is knocked into the ground by the side of a rabbit run and the tough wire loop is arranged in such a way that a rabbit, running along its usual "run," is caught by the loop. It is a very simple, but very effective trap—if one has sufficient knowledge of the ways of rabbits to know the proper places to set them.

I had always hated the idea of trapping the creatures of the woods, but, as I have said, I was desperate.

Early the following morning I set out to examine my traps. It was one of those lovely, keen, frosty mornings that I have always loved so well. As I approached the place, taking advan-

tage of every bit of cover because of the danger of meeting a gamekeeper, I felt like an animal. For the first time in my life I was planning the death of one of the little people of the forest, and that walk through the forest was the only one in my life in which I never took the slightest pleasure. Those who love the country-side and its little folk will know what I mean.

Crouching near the fence where I had set one of my "snickles" I found a half-grown rabbit. It had struggled to get away so much that the thin wire had bitten deeply into its neck. It was still alive and sat watching me with blood-shot eyes. I had to steel myself to pick it up. I had never seen a rabbit like that before. Up to that time I had always seen them as pretty things, playing in the fields or dashing across the forest clearings with white tails bobbing. I was afraid to touch it for a few moments. Then I thought about things at home and tried to work myself into a rage so that I might have courage to kill the poor quivering thing.

When I put out my hands to pick it up it screamed. Never in my life have I ever experienced anything like it. It was horrible. I struggled to take the loop from its neck and all the time its terrified screams were tearing through my brain. In spite of the keen morning the sweat poured from me. In a fury I tore the wire away and with a swift blow at the back of

the neck I killed it. Then I was horribly sick.

I am a big fellow, six feet in height, strong, and, although I say it myself, am well able to take care of myself with my fists. I have seen blood flow in plenty in the pits, and have (as is frequently the collier's way) settled more than one argument by force, but it is with shame that I write of the killing of that rabbit.

As I was putting it in my pocket I saw to my horror a gamekeeper approaching at a run. I fled, using all my knowledge of the woods in my endeavour to avoid him. I used every trick that I knew of, falling flat in the bracken when hidden by the bushes, and creeping quietly to another spot, throwing a stick in the opposite direction to which I wanted to travel in order to entice him that way. We were in a thick copse skirted by a broad belt of rhododendron bushes, and it was my intention to creep to the bushes, there to lie quietly until the coast was clear. The game of hide and seek went on for some time until, thinking I had put sufficient space between us, I stealthily crawled under the rhododendrons. With a fearful clatter an old pheasant shot out of the bush as I crawled in. It seemed as if the people of the forest were having their revenge. Hurriedly emerging, I came face to face with the gamekeeper. For once I had met my match in the woods. I

slipped off my coat and invited him to come and get me. My disgust at my own action of killing the rabbit and being so squeamish about it, and the knowledge that the gamekeeper would probably take it from me and then prosecute me, made me murderous. Nothing loath, the man laid down his bag and gun and prepared to do as I had invited him to do. Suddenly a look of recognition crossed his face. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said, "I never thought that you'd start this game." "Neither did I," I answered, still almost weeping with rage. "You've been coming in these woods ever since you were a nipper," he said, "I've seen you, if you think I haven't; and I could have trusted you anywhere." My anger left me with a rush and I felt sick again. I had betrayed my forest and all connected with it. My deep shame must have been apparent to the gamekeeper. "Let's have a look at what you've got," he said. I dragged the poor little furry body out of the coat and handed it to him. "Out of work I expect," he remarked. "Yes," I answered. "Well," he said, as he dragged a couple of full-grown rabbits from his bag, "take these. You wouldn't get a meal off a little thing like that." Then, as he turned away he said in what might have been tones of anger, but might also have been an attempt to cover up his real feelings: "And next time you want one, come and ask—Good luck, lad."

My humiliation was complete. I don't think I shall ever make a poacher.

For a long time I was puzzled and worried. There was something wrong somewhere. Other men, even though they were unemployed, could smile when they met in the dole-queue, and I was unable to smile. I did not want to joke as I waited my turn to "sign on." All that I wanted to do was to "sign on" as quickly as possible and hurry back home. My old childhood habit of crawling into my shell reasserted itself, but still there was something wrong. Night after night I would sit in the house, a nuisance to everybody. Christmas passed by unnoticed that year, except that it plunged me into further gloom because I could not provide my child with the usual little gifts.

It was in the spring of the year following my leaving the pit that I suddenly found out what was wrong. My little daughter had been taken for a walk by some of the neighbours' older children. On her return she burst breathlessly into the house, clutching in her fat little hand a few sprays of tiny young leaves. "Daddy," she chattered, "Daddy!" and her eyes were shining in the way that only a child's eyes can. "All the trees have cummed alive again." For the first time since I could remember, I had not been watching for the life to return to my forest. I had not even noticed the fact that life had

departed from the forest. So wrapped up in my own thoughts and miseries had I been that I had forgotten that she had always made me happy before, and with her I had forgotten my books, my poetry, my mates of the pit, all the things which I knew and loved I had forgotten.

I picked my child up, placed her high on my shoulders, and ran with her to the woods. It was true enough, "all the trees had cummed alive again." As I visited all the spots in that little part of the forest, spots that I knew so intimately, I told the child the stories that I had told to myself so many times. I showed her the place where one could always be sure of finding a blackbird's nest, and the funny little tree that was all twisty like a corkscrew and that in the dusk always looked like an old gnome hurrying home before it got too dark.

Later, seated on a fallen silver birch, I told her how the trees came to life again and why men loved to see the return of spring to the forest. I talked until the light had faded and only the big trunks of the oaks and beeches could be seen. As I carefully picked my way along the faint path that led to the edge of the wood, carrying the sleeping child, still grasping in her hand one spray from "a tree that had cummed alive," I was happy.

All this may seem horribly sentimental, and many of my mates would describe it in one word

—"daft." It may be ; but I hate to think of what might have happened to me if I hadn't been "daft." I hate to think what political creed I might have embraced, or what attitude towards my fellow-men I might have adopted. Fortunately most Englishmen are "daft," whether they be colliers or farmers, city men or gardeners. Perhaps that is why the English are a great nation.

Sometimes it is very hard to keep one's heart free of bitterness. Often I have had to pull myself up with a jerk and remind myself that there are other ways of looking at things. When my little daughter goes off to school after a breakfast of bread and dripping, and returns with her feet wet because her shoes are worn through, it needs something more than bitterness to help one to keep trying.

Then it is that all the things that my books taught me, and all the forest lore, is most precious to me. I take her on my knee and tell her my stories : the stories of Sherwood and its trees and birds, the stories of the fields and their flowers. They are a funny mixture these stories of my childhood, and it would be useless to attempt to tell them to grown-up people because they would appear ridiculous. Fish-and-chip shops and fairies, back alleys and harebells are unusual combinations, but as a child I had to make the best of what material I had, and the

stories became very real to me. When things are at their worst, when the future looks hopeless and one's inside is tormented with that awful boiling feeling that makes one want to rush out of the house and curse everything in order to ease the torment, when one's thoughts turn to hatred of those who are working, and one cannot pass a shop window without feeling an almost irresistible desire to smash it, it is good to be able to return to the problem of "why the holly has spikes," or "who planted the ivy at the bottom of the sycamore tree." For then I can live again through my child those hours of make-belief in the forest. I can mix up Shakespeare and Oliver Twist, or Nelson and Robin Hood, with my forest and my fairies without it mattering to anybody at all. I have never told my stories to anyone else but my daughter ; I don't think I ever will. They would never be the same on paper I know.

Perhaps I might be able to set down one of the more simple ones though. It is the story of how the people of the forest helped the miners to get rid of the Unicorn that troubled them. It will be amusing if nothing else.

The Unicorn was a lazy and cruel monster who lived in a big hole in the side of the pit-tip. Because he didn't like work himself, he couldn't bear to see anybody else working. He had no need to work because he knew an easier way of

getting plenty of black currant jam and chips and things.

Every year or so, when he had eaten all the good things, he would creep out of his den, down the pit lane, and there he would wait for the poor men who were going to work in the pit. In his claws he held a lot of little yellow cards, and it said on the back of them in big letters : RULES. But underneath RULES there were lots of words which, although they didn't take up so much room, were really much bigger and harder to understand. They were so hard that the men never did understand them.

Before the Unicorn would let anybody go past him they had to pay a shilling for one of these cards. A shilling was a lot of money and he could buy a whole heap of fish and chips with one of those. But that wasn't all by a long way ; when the men had paid for their cards they had to ask him what all those words on the back meant. Then the Unicorn would laugh like anything and tell the men that the words said that they had agreed to stay away from work when he told them to do so. They couldn't get out of it either, because every card had the owner's name on it and also the name of the pit.

Then all the men would be staying at home instead of going to work and all the children would be hungry. There would be no singing in the Oddfellow's Arms on Saturday night and

everybody would be very miserable. It was no good trying to find the Unicorn when the trouble had started because he always went to a mysterious place called Barnsley, and he would send messages from there saying that nobody must go to work yet.

One day a clever old bee, who had come all the way from the forest in order to call on some Nasturtiums living in a miner's back garden, heard some people talking about the Unicorn and the trouble he caused. He felt very sorry for the people, and he went back to the forest (after he had called upon all the Nasturtiums, of course—a bee always attends to his work first) and told all the other bees about it. The bees had a meeting, as they always do when anything is wrong, and after a lot of buzzing and flying around they decided that it was time to stop the old Unicorn's games. They sent the old bee who knew all about the miners—the one who always looks after the flowers in the back gardens—all the way to Barnsley. He found the Unicorn all right, because bees know their way about anywhere, and he pretended to the monster that he was fed up with working every day.

The Unicorn was very pleased to hear about that, and he offered the old bee a yellow card at once. The bee told him that if he would leave Barnsley and come to the forest he would be able to get lots more bees to have a yellow card,

so the Unicorn, for the very first time, left Barnsley whilst a strike was on and came to the forest. The old bee led him right into the forest until he was lost, and then all the bees from all over the place set about him with their stings, which they only use when they are really annoyed, as everybody knows. He dashed about all over the place, trying to get away. He knocked trees down and tore big furrows in the ground—the fallen trees and furrows are still to be seen—but the bees finished him off. Then they took all his yellow cards and tore them up into tiny pieces, and if anybody wants to know whereabouts in the forest the bees killed the Unicorn they have only to search until they find a big bed of tiny yellow flowers on which the bees can always be found working busily. But nobody must pull any of the flowers because the bees are very particular about them, as they have every right to be.

I have read many novels in which the chief characters have been unemployed, but I cannot say that I have been impressed. They always seem to make their characters either totally miserable or totally unconcerned about their unemployment. Whilst it is true that there is much more misery than joy, it is also true that one finds happiness in things which one had never noticed before. One hoards pleasant little incidents in the mind, incidents which

would never be noticed if one was at work. Often in the summer I have been starting off for a long walk through the woods just as the men have been going to the pits, and I frankly admit that I have been glad that I was free to go where I wished. Many a drowsy July afternoon I have laid for hours under the hedgerows listening to the puffing of the pit winding-engine in the distance, and I have actually found it in me to pity those who were sweating in the darkness beneath me. I would think to myself on such occasions—not in order to console myself, but because I was really happy about it—"Well, if I have lost my job I have also lost a hard master."

Even after four years of unemployment I get a thrill out of ignoring the pit buzzer. It was only because of the fact that I took a perverse delight in gauging my walks so that I would be near, but strolling in the opposite direction to the pit, when the buzzer blew that I discovered a fascinating little copse within a few hundred yards of the pit bank. Small incidents like that can mean much when one is unemployed. When I was in employment I always had to leave things just at the most interesting times. If I was watching a field of corn being cut, the buzzer would be certain to interrupt when the horses had only a few more rounds to go.

Early in life I had conceived a violent hatred

of that buzzer. It was always butting in when I had found something interesting. Once I spent hours trying to find out what it was that made funny little squeaking sounds in the long grass growing in the hedge bottom. I was down on my knees watching one spot, hardly daring to breathe, and just as I was certain that the mysterious thing was going to show itself—the raucous yell of the buzzer spoiled everything.

All those things come back to me as I wander in the fields and woods, and because of them I can take a pleasure sometimes in my enforced idleness.

Then, again, in the dole queues things happen, things that brighten one's spirit for many days. More than once I have watched a man carefully break his last Woodbine in two and hand one half to a pal. Only a very simple thing, I know, but it helped me to keep my faith in my own kind. A few days ago I saw a young chap, badly clothed and looking as if he had not eaten for days, pick up a ten-shilling note near the entrance to the exchange. Nobody else saw him pick it up and he could quite easily have pocketed it. Without any hesitation whatever he walked into the exchange and handed it over the counter, and as he went in he remarked to me: "Some poor devil as bad off as me lost it, and it wouldn't do me any good if I kept it." A man has to have "guts" and plenty of them to do that when he is on the dole.

A favourite subject with writers of "dole" novels is the attitude of the "dole clerks" and officials towards the unemployed. They (the writers) always make the clerks and officials the villains of the piece. If the novels are to be believed, they are the most unsympathetic, autocratic and self-satisfied people in existence. At the risk of incurring the displeasure of many people, I would like to do a little de-bunking myself upon this matter.

In my own town at least there is little of that kind of thing. During four years of unemployment I can honestly say that I have met with almost unfailing courtesy and much practical sympathy. The clerks show an interest in the men. One whom I know once took up the greater part of his dinner hour walking to the other side of the town in order to tip a man off that a certain firm was setting men on. When the "means test" visitor calls there is little of the hostility between him and the family that is so often depicted in novels. The visitor does his rather unpleasant job in a way that no fair-minded person could object or take exception to. He was probably unemployed himself before he got the job. Recently I had to negotiate on a very knotty problem with the "means test" people. The civility I received and the interest displayed in my case would have put many much less maligned authorities in the shade. I hold no

brief for the "means test"—as one of the unemployed I could not be expected to do so—but I do feel that those who so strenuously oppose it should confine themselves to attacking the means test only, and should refrain from belittling men who are doing more than their share in the work of making the lot of the unemployed man more bearable.

CHAPTER XVII

KEEPING HOUSE

FEW people who have not experienced it have a proper conception of the life of an unemployed man and his family.

Some people imagine it to be hell upon earth. Others talk as if the unemployed man is the most fortunate member of the community. I once heard a fairly wealthy person holding forth to a group of other fairly wealthy people. "It's not very nice to be unemployed," he said, "but when one comes to look at it, an unemployed man has *no responsibility*. If his child is ill he can get free medical treatment, and the same thing applies to himself and his wife. If he is in debt he doesn't have to pay. And," he added, "everybody knows that they eat the cheapest of food, so that their dole goes much further than our money." He was evidently an authority on such matters and I do hope he reads this.

For a wife and one child I have been receiving for the last twelve months, thirty shillings and sixpence per week. For three years before that I received on an average twenty-eight shillings. I will, without having any axe to grind, try to

give a truthful account of how we live through the week on thirty shillings and sixpence. It must be remembered that I have been "out" for four years and that I have only the clothes which I stand up in. That applies also to my wife and child.

I draw my dole on Friday morning at about ten o'clock. In my pocket I have a list of things to buy on the way home. If I walk round long enough looking in all the shop windows I might find a bit of bacon at elevenpence per pound, but sometimes there is none less than a shilling. I take half a pound of it and it is no use grumbling about the pieces of bony gristle or the discoloured patches on each rasher either. Next I buy a tin of tomatoes, at the very least they are sixpence per tin. A quarter of a pound of tea at fivepence and two tins of condensed milk—two for threepence-ha'penny—and one loaf, fourpence-ha'penny.

I then hurry home with my purchases, because neither the wife nor myself have had any breakfast. I have been eating bacon and tomatoes every Friday, Saturday and Sunday morning for four years. You are probably wondering how half a pound of bacon is made to last three meals. Well, that's one of the things one learns to manage after a year or two on the dole.

After making those purchases I have twenty-eight and sixpence left to hand over to my wife.

The first thing to be thought of then is rent. Any owner of property in a colliery area will tell you that most colliers hate to owe rent. I have known people, on scores of occasions, pay the rent and be left without a penny in the house. My weekly rent is twelve and sixpence, add to this the cost of two hundredweights of coal at one-and-threepence per hundredweight, one shilling for electric light (sometimes we manage with candles and thus save about fourpence), one and six weekly payment on a bill for boots and shoes and tenpence insurance. We have then about ten shillings to spend on food (excluding the bacon and tomatoes, etc.) and clothing for the three of us. We can't be miserable on Friday, Saturday and Sunday because we are feeding fairly well. On Saturday afternoon we mostly have a few chips, but we don't bother much about supper because we still have a bit of bacon left for Sunday morning. Sunday dinner (miners always call the midday meal dinner) is a thumping big meal of potatoes, bread, a small portion of roast beef (cow-beef of course, they don't sell bull-beef at our price) and more potatoes and bread. That's the real secret of living on the dole—potatoes and bread.

Monday and Tuesday are not too bad. There is usually a bit of meat left from the "Sunday joint," and with a few potatoes and greens left over from the week-end, it is possible to make a

decent meal or two. It is on Wednesday and Thursday that the real pinch comes. In the fat drawn from the Sunday joint we fry slices of bread. Now fried bread can be very tasty when eaten along with eggs and bacon, but it gets monotonous when one faces a slice of it each Wednesday and Thursday morning—without the eggs and bacon.

Sometimes I have a bit of luck and manage to earn a shilling or so. If this happens at the week-end we have a little party on Saturday night. I go to the provision market and look out for the cheap things—a few oranges or apples and threepennyworth of sweets for my daughter, a piece of fish for supper and perhaps a packet of Woodbines for myself. Then we are really happy. I suppose somebody would be able to suggest better things to buy than oranges, sweets and Woodbines, but you see we have a “party.” For the time being we forget about unemployment and fried bread and talk about the time when I may succeed in finding employment. We talk about those who are worse off than we are and we even find it in our hearts to pity them. It is at such times as this that one finds courage to keep on trying. It is when I realise that I have still a home of my own, my own bits of furniture, my own pots and pans and my own fire-side, that I can look upon the world in an unbiased way. Nobody can interfere with me

and mine ; nobody can say that I must not buy sweets or Woodbines.

Sitting by the fire with my child on my knee I am supremely happy. I tell the child the stories of the homes of England, of how, jealously guarded by the might of the law, the home of the Englishman has become the envy of the world. It is the fashion to-day to laugh at the old saying that " an Englishman's home is his castle." My child shall not grow up to laugh at her home. I have taught her to love it and to respect other people's love of theirs. It may seem old fashioned and no doubt provoke some of my more sophisticated readers to laughter, but I do believe the old saying—My home is my castle and I am prepared to fight tooth and nail in the defence of it. Political parties may promise improvements, but if I am expected to sacrifice one tiny portion of my power in my own home in return for improvement—I don't want any improvement.

The way in which certain novelists, having spent a week or two in a mining area obtaining local colour (I think that's the term they use), proceed to describe the conditions in those areas as being absolutely sordid and revolting is ridiculous. I remember how in one book I read the writer took great pains to describe in detail how one character tore up pieces of paper for use in the lavatory. I laughed when I read it. Which certainly was not what the writer intended the

reader to do. Any other miner who read it would laugh—if he did not curse, as my father did when I showed it to him. “It’s cum ter summat,” he said, “if that’s all thi can find ter write abart.”

Why do they persist in this kind of writing? What good does it do? There are many things against which one might write and many ways in which writers might help to improve conditions, but long records of revolting and miserable incidents from which all the decent things have so obviously been deliberately withheld, won’t help at all, because if the reader believed it all he would come to the conclusion that it was too hopeless for anything.

If one of these writers was describing the scene in my father’s garden shed when the men from the neighbouring allotments were having a chat around the stove, he would take page after page to tell of unshaven chins and soiled hands; he would twist every remark made by the men into a violent expression of hatred against something or other, and he would put forward as proof of the awfulness of it all the miners’ interest in horses, dogs and dominoes. It is true that the miner sometimes has a growl against those who have more money than himself, but who hasn’t? It is also true that one can see many unshaven chins, but I don’t suppose anybody else bothers about them.


In reality that little roughly built shed, sheltering its group of unemployed men, is one of the happiest and most amusing places to be found in the coalfields. I remember, not long ago, reading a book about miners in which the writer talked of "the smouldering fires of revolution which lay hidden amongst the unemployed miners." The book was very convincing, and I almost doubted my own ideas by the time I had finished it. Thinking it might interest my father, I walked up to his shed to tell him about it. Approaching the shed by the narrow path I heard a voice raised in anger: "The swine," it said, "what do they care about us?" I thought that I had discovered some of those "smouldering embers." Here, I thought, is an agitator railing against the capitalists. I was rather astonished to find that the man was not talking about capitalists at all—the swine he referred to were certain prominent members of the T.U.C.

The conditions in miners' homes to-day are infinitely better than they were when I was a child. All the talk of agitators will not alter that fact. Go into any home in the mining villages of Notts or South Yorkshire and you are almost certain to find comfortable suites of furniture and clean and tidy rooms. In many of the old houses a room could not be made to look clean or tidy and the women often despaired.

All that is being altered. I know of one village where every house has a decent single garden which the colliery company encourages the householder to cultivate, a bathroom, hot water, electric light and other modern conveniences. The men have their cricket and football, tennis and swimming clubs, hiking and cycling clubs, and a host of other things. A small lake has been made into one of the best swimming and boating pools for many miles around, with a special part for children and non-swimmers. It is well worth while to travel to this village when the miners are having their annual sports-day. With their wives and children beautifully dressed (and miners' wives know how to dress nowadays) they are probably among the happiest of English workpeople. The colliery officials are keenly interested in the welfare of the people and can always be found joining in with the men—not in the patronising spirit that was common years ago but in a spirit of real comradeship. Though there are still disputes between the employers and employees, there is at such times a very noticeable absence of that bitterness which has for so long been common in mining disputes. In spite of much agitation the bitterness is disappearing, and I believe if other colliery companies will follow the lead of this company mining will quickly become a much more profitable industry for all concerned.

One thing which has impressed me more than anything else is that the streets of this particular village are lined with trees. There can't be much wrong with a colliery company that plants trees.

In no section of the community does that traditional Englishman's love of his home live more than in the mining community. How else would they with infinite patience rebuild their homes after each disastrous strike or lock-out? Sometimes one is tempted to think that all the false impressions given by writers to the public are given in order to justify and herald the coming of a new bureaucracy with the power to interfere and poke its nose into any man's home. But whilst the miner takes little heed of what is written about him, I know only too well what he would have to say to any nosey-parker who tried to interfere in his home. He would be English enough to object strenuously.



CHAPTER XVIII

A TRADITIONALIST'S CREED

ABOUT five months before the election of 1935 I obtained a job that taught me more in a few months than I could have learned from books in twice the number of years. I became a Missioner or Canvasser on behalf of the National Labour Committee in my home constituency.

I have heard it said many times that a canvasser for any other party than those of the Left would get nothing but insults from the miners. It is not true. The miner in his own home is a gentleman and having argued politics with him in his home I should know. In the heat of the argument he may let slip an occasional swear word, but who doesn't? If swearing in political arguments proves that a man is not a gentleman, then this country is sadly lacking in gentlemen. During those few months I visited hundreds of miners' homes and can honestly say that I was never insulted once. "Yer know," said one young collier to me after a prolonged discussion, "Ar loike ter 'ere both sides, but your side doesn't come very often."

There, I believe, lies the secret of the success of

the Socialist Movement in the mining areas, and there is the reason for the growth of Communism in the same areas. It is on the doorstep that elections are won and the Socialist and Communist know it. That the Conservatives have lost all hold in the mining areas is quite evident ; but I believe that with proper organisation that hold can once again be obtained. The Conservatives have been sitting back too long. They have sat back so long that all the great ideals of Conservatism have been forgotten and the party is looked upon as a protection association for local tradesmen. Whilst the Socialists devote time and energy unsparingly to their party, the majority of Conservative supporters consider that by sending their annual subscription and attending one meeting each year they are doing their duty to the party.

The kind of person who votes Conservative because his parents did so is fast dying out. People to-day (or at least the people that I met on the doorstep) are eager to know what it is all about, and the forces of the Left are always on the spot to tell them. Pushing pamphlets through letter-boxes never yet converted a man or woman from Socialism to Conservatism. There is only one way and that is by talking to the people, and by showing a real interest in their problems. When a miner is in difficulties over his Health Insurance or Unemployment

Benefit, he makes a bee line for the nearest Socialist Councillor. The Councillor will go to endless trouble in order to help, and later on, when the elections come round, the miner, being an intensely loyal fellow, will consider himself in honour bound to help the man who helped him. The miner being, as I am trying to show in this book, a real Englishman with the true characteristics of our race, can never be a Socialist, but because of that loyalty and sterling fighting quality he may well become the tool of revolutionaries. If that should ever be so, the responsibility will rest upon the shoulders of those Conservatives who, because of the fact that they have lost sight of the ideals of Conservatism, have lost also the common touch.

In my own division a year or two ago we had a remarkable example of how the men of the pits can be brought into the Conservative Party. Mr. Hugh Molson, who was at that time prospective candidate for the division, organised a "Conservative Miners' Council" to which anyone might come irrespective of his political views. Matters of interest to miners were discussed, and everyone encouraged to say just what they thought. Being miners, they didn't hesitate to say it. The spectacle of dozens of miners, young and old, each with the blue scars on his face which are the marks of his trade, earnestly discussing Conservatism, was a sight

that would have done the heart of any Conservative good.

Gradually the "Council" grew and became known, others became inquisitive about it, and I am convinced that had not the candidate left for another division that organisation would have become a power with which to reckon.

The idea that the Conservative Party only exists for the protection of the "haves" can be removed from the minds of the miners. But it must first be removed from the mind of the "arm-chair," one-meeting-per-year type of Conservative. The only way to explain a great creed is by getting out on to the street corners and doorsteps and talking to the people.

If what I have said offends anyone, I cannot say that I am sorry. I found my Conservative principles in my good English books, in my Sherwood, in the darkness of the pit, and in the minds and hearts of my own people. Those principles aim higher than the mere gaining of some end for a jumped-up subscription-lawyer. Once when I was about twenty years of age an old Conservative miner who had got past working, and was eking out the last few years of his life on the Old Age Pension, handed me a book and said: "'Ere, ar reckon this might interest yer." It did. It was the *Life of Disraeli*.

One part of the Division in which I worked is purely agricultural and I loved the talks with

the farmers, although it always seemed wrong to bring politics into those little villages. One can feel perfectly at ease talking politics in some squalid little backyard where it is so obvious that something needs altering ; but when one is leaning against the door of a cow-house with the smell of the cattle in one's nostrils ; or perching on the shaft of a cart with the hens busily scratching beneath, it is another matter. Parliament seems a long way off at such times.

I could never get over the feeling of being an intruder whenever I walked into a farmyard. What could I tell these people that they didn't already know ? I could talk about marketing boards and imports and figures. I could tell them how the Government had done this or that. I could glibly repeat statistics to prove my arguments, but when the farmer, with that slow, calm way that the people of the land have, raised his blue eyes (all farmers seem to have blue eyes) and looked me in the face, I always felt that I ought to go away at once. Usually they would say : " Don't bother, laddie, we shan't vote red " (and, of course, figures have shown that they don't vote red), but I always had the uncomfortable feeling as I walked toward the farmyard gate that the farmer was silently doubling up with laughter at some joke that it was far beyond my power to see.

Only once did I have the chance of a real argument with a farmer. He was the part owner of a small farm and I had been enlarging upon the actions of the Government in their desire to help him. I was inwardly congratulating myself upon the way in which I had been putting it over. Without any warning he passionately burst out: "Blast yer politics! Why the hell can't we be left alone? Me and me brother worked on this farm as lads, scraped an' saved. Nobody 'elped us then! We know that at the best it can only provide a livin', an' that's all we want. Nearly ivery day there's a damned paper to fill in, or some damned busybody comes pokin' 'is neb in, but in another month or two we shall 'ave to leave. We can't carry on. . . ." I did not stay to argue with him.

Farming and mining are two very different means of getting a living. The farmer does his work in the light and the sunshine with the songs of the birds around him, and the clean breath of the wind to cool him. The miner sweats in the blackness hundreds of feet below the farmer, and the only song he hears is that of the squeaking haulage pulleys. Yet when one gets to know them both, the resemblance between the two in many ways is astonishing. Each deeply resents any interference with his work. Nothing is more distasteful to them than being told how

to do their job. Each takes the same pride in his work. I have seen an old farmer cast exactly the same appreciative glance over a well-thatched haystack as a miner casts over a neatly timbered roof. They are the same people. It is not so many years since the miners' ancestors worked in the fields and knew a well-thatched stack when they saw one. I know old men of the pits who can stand in the harvest field and talk to the farmer about crops and land, and a casual listener would be puzzled as to which was which unless he saw the faces of them. Deep in the miner is a great love and hunger for the land that will not be denied. It is grand, yet pathetic, to see it come out.

When the time for the gathering of the pea crop comes round, one need only spend a few days in my home town to be convinced of the truth of this. The farmers need a great deal of casual help in pulling and bagging the peas, and he comes to the colliers for it. In the early morning, long before the pits have begun the day's work, many miners, accompanied by their wives and children in most cases, can be seen marching off down the road in the opposite direction to the pit, each one carrying a basket or bucket, and a parcel of food. They are going pea-pulling, and in order to do this the father of the family is most probably having a day off from the pit. For pulling a large sack of peas a

person receives ninepence or a shilling, according to the size of the peas being harvested.

If anyone supposes that this is obviously a better job than mining, he ought sometime to try pulling a sack of peas for ninepence. It is a far more difficult and tiring task than one would believe until it has been tried. Yet the miners love to go, and the sight of hundreds of men women and children laughing and joking, singing and whistling as they work in the sunshine is moving in the extreme.

In the evening, long after the pit-workers have finished their shift, the families can be seen wearily trudging homeward ; the mother carrying the children's baskets, the father carrying the youngest child fast asleep in his arms. Father has "had a shift off," they say. A shift off ! He has worked (and so has his wife and children) from dawn to late in the evening, and they will be lucky if they have earned as much between them as father would have earned in the pit had he gone there. As, in the case of the poaching miner, I can hear the exasperated reader saying : "Why in the name of Heaven does he do it then ?" I might just as easily ask the reader : "Why do you potter about in your garden growing vegetable marrows when you could buy a beautiful marrow for fourpence ?" It is that longing for the scent of the soil, that urge to gather the harvest of the year. It is that in-

grained love of the land that sends the miner into the pea-field and the city man into his back garden. "Land love," I have called it ; and like another kind of love which we all know of, it is never logical.

It may not be in the best interests of the coal industry when a man absents himself from the pit in order to work in the fields, but the fields were there long before the pits came, and when coal-mining is a thing of the past and the slag-heaps have become lovely tree-covered mounds, the fields will remain. Let us be thankful for this "land love" that lives and burns in the miner, for should it ever die then he would be indeed the most unfortunate of God's creatures.

I am aware that many of the things that I have said about politics will be laughed at by miners and others. I have been asked often by my mates just what I should like to see happen in England. The things which I should like to see are, I am convinced, slowly coming. I would like to see a world of English politics in which no man hated another, a world in which each man credited his opponent with a desire to do good even if that opponent's attempts at achieving good seemed wrong. I believe that George Lansbury is one of the finest of men. I have a great admiration for James Maxton. I look upon Stanley Baldwin as one of the most sincere men who ever held a position in the government of England.

I believe that the majority of the members of political parties are in politics because of a great desire to improve things. I do not believe for one moment the old saying "that they are all alike once they get into power." Too many books and articles are written nowadays in which politicians are made to appear as unprincipled scheming men with no thought for anything but their own welfare. I know that I shall be accused of having a "simple faith" ; I know that my mates will say : "He must be daft," but I cannot believe that people are all bad.

The Socialists have said and done many foolish things, but they had the best of intentions. The Conservatives have made enormous blunders, but their intentions were equally good. I do not like Socialism—I hate it ! But I do not hate Socialists. My father is a Socialist to-day and a better man never walked the streets in my opinion ; but I dislike his politics and shall fight him and his party whenever I can. During the last General Election I worked for the National candidate in our constituency, whilst my father and brothers did all that they could to make people vote Socialist. But at night we sat down together for supper and afterwards played a game of dominoes. That is what I would like to see in politics !—a friendly toleration of the other fellow's ideas but a determination to fight against those ideas if you don't like

them. I do not think that a man is asking for the moon when he asks for that.

When it comes to downright one-sidedness and a refusal to see any good whatsoever in the opposing political factions I have found that the Socialist is much more prone to adopt that attitude than the Conservative. In our constituency in the last election the National candidate was howled down on more than one occasion, but the Socialist candidate was never interrupted. When the result of the election was declared the National candidate was beaten by about fifteen hundred votes. The result did not justify all the howling down. I do not remember ever seeing a Socialist candidate howled down by Conservatives, not even when the Conservatives had a majority twice as large. That is another thing which has turned me away from Socialism.

On the other hand, the Conservatives have weaknesses which are glaring. Sometimes people whom one would expect to know better make the most foolish remarks. One gentleman—a distinguished person and an aspirant for political honours—said to me not long ago: "But I have heard such awful things about miners. I have been told how, during the War, they earned as much as twelve pounds per week and spent it on champagne, and how they refused to fight for their country. . . ."

A favourite saying amongst stormy Socialists in the mining areas is : " If a donkey stood as Socialist candidate I would vote for it." I have told them many times that if some of the people whom I have known as representatives of the working class are anything to go by, they have been voting for donkeys for years. It is true that this pretended interest in the working class on the part of many so-called Socialists is not disinterested, and some of them are not so foolish as they look.

Although I have no liking for Socialism I have every admiration for the men who through thick and thin have continued to fight for Socialism. It is the political adventurer, the man who in order to further his own career has tampered with the miner's union, throwing men out of work, bringing a great industry to the verge of disaster, causing untold misery, poverty, hunger, hatred, whom I dislike. It is useless for them to deny that the miner has been badly misled. Every miner in the coal-fields knows it and knows it well. It is an easy matter to stand up before a crowd of hard-working men and tell them that they are working too hard for a much too small wage. It is easy to bawl : " Workers of the world unite ! " but it takes courage to stand up before that same crowd and say : " We have made a mistake." I have never heard it said on a Socialist or Trade Union platform in my life.

In the recent County Council elections I was put forward as a candidate in a Socialist stronghold. I was beaten easily—I hardly expected otherwise. Frequently, beaten candidates will come forward with a long list of reasons as to why they were defeated, but they seldom give the real reasons. The first reason they give (and both sides give it) is that the electorate is too apathetic. Of course the people are apathetic ; and while the candidate assumes that he can whip the people into displaying enthusiasm by a campaign extending over about a fortnight, they will remain apathetic. If Socialism is to be kept in check in the mining areas, the campaign against it must go on unceasingly. Virulent attacks on the Socialist representatives will not do any good either, that only serves to exalt the Socialist in the eyes of the miner. Pamphlets pushed under doors are a sheer waste of good money and speeches from public platforms are worse than useless. It is in the pubs and clubs and on the doorsteps that the campaigns must be carried out, and I say with every confidence that the candidate who is prepared to spend his time with the people in these areas, taking a real interest in their troubles and working wherever possible on their behalf, can win from Socialism any mining constituency in Great Britain. One glass of beer taken in a pub tap-room would be more effective than a thousand

handbills, and five minutes' talk on a doorstep would go a great deal further than half an hour on a platform.

The miners are seeking something new. The Socialist Party is fast losing favour. In one part of this division we have recently seen a revolt of the miners against Trades Union dictatorship, a revolt that has shaken Transport House to its very foundations.¹ There is the same unrest in other parts of the coal-fields and once let it break out, then those who have so long thrived upon that loyalty which the miner has given unstintingly to the Socialist cause will find that he can be also an implacable enemy. That is where the danger lies! Which way will the miner go? He expects his political party to be virile and active; it is because the Socialist Party has lost that virility that he is becoming disgusted with it.

Lurking in the background, ever active, quick to seize on any opportunity to help a man in his disputes with the P.A.C. or any other body, are the Communists. Unless real steps are taken by anti-revolutionary organisations, it is to Communism that the miner will turn—not because he is a Communist at heart any more than he has ever been a Socialist at heart, but because he looks to his political organisations for activity.

¹ Dispute between Y.M.A. and Notts Industrial Union (Spencers).

Never has Conservatism been presented with such an opportunity as that in the coal-fields to-day. Thousands of good men, men who have known what it means to suffer because of their political beliefs, are wandering in a political wilderness. The Socialist Party, once their pride, has become weak and colourless. Its leaders have lost touch with the common people and to-day the miner looks in vain for assistance from them.

Once Conservatism inspired men to achieve great things in the cause of England and humanity. Miners walked to the polling booths with the blue favours in their jackets and politics were politics—not class-hatred. I believe that if the party concentrated on the mining areas in the proper way they could deal Socialism a blow from which it would never recover.

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CHAPTER XIX

EPILOGUE

NOW, what of the future? I am still a member of what the Press loves to call "The army of unemployed." Every Wednesday and Friday I must line up for the signing on at the Labour Exchange along with hundreds of others of my own kind. I must fill in the forms and go before the "Boards" in order to prove that I have no savings, property or private income. I see my pals, men and lads whom I have worked side by side with, standing hopelessly in the dole queues, or hurrying miserably around the street corners, and these men who have laughed at death in the pits, and joked as they slaved in the darkness, are forgetting how to smile for they are not accustomed to absolute idleness.

The Communists stand at the street corners and on the pieces of waste land urging the men to "action." God knows what they mean by "action," unless the long miserable treks to London that they try to organise can be termed "action." There is talk of fresh industries, of oil from coal and many other things, but it only seems to be talk.

It is for the older men that I feel most keenly ; the old blue-scarred veterans of the pits ; men who have slaved and joked about it, men who have faced death in its most awful forms, and laughed at it. They have fought all their lives in the ceaseless war of the pits ; a war in which every day men are killed and maimed. They have pitted their wits and skill against the forces of nature and won out. They have seen pals, brothers, sons, fathers, killed and maimed at their very sides. They have known hunger, poverty, misery even as they fought—and they have laughed. They have made mistakes (plenty of them), but they themselves have been the chief sufferers for their mistakes, and they haven't whined about it. " Colliers 'ev allus bin t'door-mats for industry," I once heard my father say. I believe that too. But, strangely enough, when I try to point out to him and to others how they have been used as tools to further the interests of a political party, they can't or won't see it. But I must not talk too much about this aspect of things because my father, being a staunch Socialist (and no worse a man for that), always promises to give me " a poke in t'lug if I doan't stop talkin' daft," and big as I am, he is still quite capable of doing it.

Perhaps I do " talk daft." Perhaps it is daft to hope for better things to come. Perhaps my Sherwood is not so beautiful as I think it is, and

perhaps the people of England are not so grand as I think they are—Perhaps.

“Ar Bill,” said my brother, “ain’t a bad lad, but ’is ’ead’s allus in’t clouds.” Yet he it was that borrowed my Shelley without asking me for it, and can be found any morning mooning about in the woods or getting his feet wet as he wanders along the hedgerows.

If there is not beauty about the forest when the first rays of the sun are shining away the mists from the hollows and the scent of maybloom hangs heavy under the trees that skirt the wood ; if when the sky is blood-red in the evening and the forest is motionless and silent, there is not a peace that helps, nay *makes* me forget the troubles that wait down in the town ; then I must be “daft”—Thank God. I have gone hungry many times. I have known the humiliation of poverty in the midst of plenty. I have slaved in the pit, and idled on the dole. I have learned that men can have the courage of lions and still be gentle, can curse yet say beautiful things and can suffer with a smile. I have found a belief in mankind which many who found life easier still deny, and because of that faith I can look forward to the future without fear. There are many, many books which I must read, many lovely poems and great thoughts still to discover. In my Sherwood many days may dawn for me to watch, and many evenings will fall wherein

I may dream. I have still the pleasure of seeing the sea to experience, and I have still the mountains to see and climb. If I have been tied to one place I have come to know it all the better for that, and if I have spent my life amongst one kind of people I have learned to love them all the more.

Sometimes I have to pause and consider my ideas. My pals are so sure that I am wrong that it causes me almost to doubt them. "Haven't the rich always oppressed the workers?" they ask. "Would you have gone hungry if your father had not been ill-treated by the upper class?" It is hard to explain at such times what I feel about things. I think that the thing which they fail to grasp is that I do not resent that hunger so much as I *fear* it. When I try to explain that because of the hunger and poverty of my childhood I learned to love England and my books, they just look at me with a pitying sort of a glance and walk away. Then I begin to examine things again and to wonder if I am a bit daft.

I do not believe, however, that I could ever change my ideas, everything—my politics, my books, my poetry, the woods, the colliers, are inextricably mixed to make the England of my mind. I could not possibly sort one thing out of the mass without the whole thing being spoiled. I know very little about the people of England

from practical experience of them. My England is peopled with colliers and farmers, yet I feel that through them I know as much about our people as one needs to know.

"You must travel in order to know your own people and country better," I have been told. I know that ; I know that the poet sings :

"What do they know of England
Who only England know?"

The prospects of my ever travelling to other countries are very remote. I don't particularly want to do so yet. I have still to see England—Devonshire, Surrey, Shropshire, dozens of places, scores of towns and villages which my books have told me about.

At thirty-one years of age I have all these things before me ; more than I can ever hope to manage. If these pleasures are to be mine some day, then I feel that I may be envied by many. If those pleasures are not for me, then I am still to be envied, for I still have my Sherwood.

I often feel that I want to boast of my love for my country. I want to tell everybody that it is the most beautiful country in the world. I want to shout that its people are the finest in the world, but I was once told that nobody ever does that, and that I wouldn't be believed—why, I don't know. Many of the writers in my books openly boasted their love, why shouldn't I ? I do love

England ! I love its green lanes and its dusty, winding roads, those roads which Chesterton said were made by the "rolling English drunkard." I love the rainy February mornings when the woods are dripping with moisture and the sombre trees are half hidden in a purple-brown twilight even in the morning. I love the gusty March days when the floor of the forest is strewn with dead branches and the cold wind rushing through the gaps in the hedgerow causes one to hasten toward the shelter of the nearest tree.

I love the keen frosty mornings when one's eyes are running with the cold, and the frozen ground hurts the feet as one walks along the field paths. I love the rattle of the reaping-machine, the sound of the turnip chopper as it is operated by some farm hand in the field, and the smell of cattle in the steam of the cow-house on a winter's day.

I am frequently told by my friends that I should not love England if I had not been taught to do so at school. That is not true. My ideas may seem rather foolish to many people, but I have written them down because I sincerely believe in them. If my life had been as miserable as many of my pals say it has, then I might not love England, but my life has held much happiness which I cannot conveniently forget so that I may believe in some political creed. It might

have held more happiness if things had been better, but I know that it might also have held much more misery than it has. Perhaps they did try to teach me to love England when I was at school, but it never impressed me very much. I never needed a teacher to tell me that England was beautiful. In fact, I always thought that I could, if given a chance, tell the teacher how beautiful it was—I used to try sometimes, but they were mostly too busy telling me in their way.

There lives in a miserable little street in this town one of the most tragic yet most wonderful persons I ever met. She is a widow of sixty years of age, her husband was killed in a colliery accident many years ago. Her eldest son, a large picture of whom hangs on the wall of the squalid kitchen, was killed in the War. Her eldest daughter suffered an accident at an early age and lost an arm. Later the daughter married, and bore two children, one of whom gasped out his life in that same house. Within a few years she also died in childbirth, leaving the widow to care for the two children. One of the widow's sons had an accident and is blind in one eye. He has been unemployed for many years and another son who has never worked suffers from the most terrible fits, falling without warning and enduring the tortures of hell. Yet uncomplainingly the old lady continues to go out scrubbing or working in the fields.

Always there is a cup of tea for the visitor, always a smile. Nothing seems to daunt her. From her front window she sees nothing but another row of hovels, from her back window she sees much the same. Yet whenever I visit her her conversation invariably turns to the fields and woods of England. I doubt if in her life she ever took a holiday in the country. Her days in the fields have been days of hard exhausting work under the hot sun or sodden with rain, but she loves the fields with a passionate love, a love which, because of her years of misery in a colliery town slum, burns ever brighter as the days go by. The love of England's country-side, laugh at it as some people may, is a real and wonderful thing. I have been told many times that we only love it because someone taught us to do so. Well, nobody ever taught me to love England, except England herself.

The widow would seem to have every reason to hate England, it has given her little but hard work and poverty. I have never heard her say that she loves England. I have only seen her old eyes light up at the mention of fields and woods and a look of quiet pride steal over her features as she gazed at the picture of her son who died in the War.

The fact that she was taught to love England while at school would never explain how through all the years of poverty in a dismal back alley

she has kept in her mind pictures of the countryside which have given her the courage to carry on. The love of England is not taught in council schools of the mining villages nor at Oxford and Cambridge. One learns it from every misty morning when the wet grass soaks the feet as one walks through it. One learns it from the rutted lanes where the spiders' webs are hanging from the hawthorn hedge. It creeps into the heart when the scent of the newly-ploughed fields is borne on the wind. It steals into the very soul when the harness of the plough horses is heard jingling on the other side of the hedge. All the teachers in the world would never have told me what the lowing of the cattle or wind in the beeches in Sherwood told me.

If the name of England was never mentioned in the schools and no mention of love of country was made, the people of England would still love their damp woods and misty fields, for they give to the unhappy a consolation far beyond any pleasure that money can buy. The reader might ask me what I know of the pleasures of money when I have never had any. Well, I did learn something about money at school, but no teacher ever tried to tell me that the rich had a greater appreciation of Sherwood because of their money. It was because of my poverty and hunger that I came to love the woods and fields, for they helped me to forget such things. It is the same with

the old lady—a lifetime of poverty has been made bearable and in a way happy because of this inborn love for England which I am convinced lives in us all. Whilst it continues to be reborn in the hearts of the people of the island England will remain a great country and its people a wonderful people.

When I think of the name England there arises in my mind the same thoughts and pictures which I have always conjured up. It is a funny picture—a strange mixture of things which have stuck in my mind for years—the blood-red sky behind the poplar trees which I used to watch during the summer evenings ; the call of the corncrake one Saturday evening after a shower which had dashed the corn and left little heaps of twigs in the roadway near the forest ; the church bells on a Sunday evening when I had waited buried deep in the bracken until such time as I might get home without people seeing my ragged trousers ; a thrush which always whistled in the trees near the old Gatehouse when I was waiting for the pit-bus, and so on. I was not taught to love those at school.

As I see it, poverty has taught me to love my country even more than I might have done had life been more kind. Swaying trees mean more to me than waving flags. Howling March winds tell me more than cheering crowds. The rattling farm cart has more music than the throbbing

drum, and the talk of the men in the pubs holds more of beauty than the inspired oratory of demagogues. I believe that every Englishman knows these things, but it has become the fashion to laugh at them.

That fashion will die out. When the flags are in tatters and the drums have lost their voice, when the oratory no longer inspires men to fight and suffer for things of little value, the trees of England will still sway to the wind and tell their stories to those who listen. It is not by the pomp of power or the glory of war that England retains the love of her people. The Corner-Boys who remained in France after the War knew deep down in their rough hearts what they were fighting for. They did not go to war because a foreign power threatened that strange thing called prestige which England is said to possess ; they had never heard of such a thing. Faintly they understood that something was threatening the peace of the fields around the pit village, and because they understood that they went out to fight. Of all the things which are calculated to raise the ire of an Englishman, the most potent is to set foot upon his garden. You may sometimes ridicule his home life, you may damn his political system and even water his beer in comparative safety, but set so much as one single foot upon his patch of soil and you have created a potential murderer.

I seem to be returning to my old theme of "land love" again, but I do not see how I can write about England and Englishmen without doing so. I find it impossible to believe that there is one person in the whole of this country who could walk through the forest without feeling something of what I say. I do not believe that there is a man or woman who could look at a freshly ploughed field or a cottage garden, and still remain oblivious to the evidence of the reality of this land love. I have heard it said, that we have left the old ways never to return; it is not true. The ways of the soil are eternal. Its pull is irresistible. All the tumult and shouting of mankind cannot drown its voice. The trees will grow again upon the battlefields of France as they have grown amid the ruins of ancient cities of the world and men will return eagerly and humbly to the tilling of the land, for she offers to men that which is indispensable to man, peace. Not the peace of idleness, but peace earned by humbleness of heart and the sweat of the brow.

I remember hearing a party of men calling another man a fool. He was a farm labourer of close upon fifty years of age. It was election time and he had walked into the town to register his vote, wearing a large blue rosette. Somebody told him that he was a fool to be working on the land when he might be earning much more in

the pit, and a bigger fool for being a Tory. He eyed his tormentors for a moment in silence and then his blue eyes blazed as he gritted out : " Afore yer blasted pits were sunk, an' afore yer damned reds were thought on, wi' 'ed t'land an' Tories ; an' remember this," he said, as he poked one man rather forcibly in the waistcoat with his long stick, " when yer've done wi' t'pits and t'reds, two things'll be waiting for yer ter look after yer—t'land an' Tories ! " He may have been a fool, but one can forgive a fool if he really believes in his foolishness.

With such beliefs and instincts as his—and I believe I share them with millions—how can I be a Socialist or Communist? How can I say, along with some of my friends in the pits, that Russia means just as much to me as England.

To the Russian his country might be as good as England, but if my Communist pals think that the Russian's opinion stops at that, then they are very wrong. One can struggle for the realisation of the ideal of the Brotherhood of Man without running around praising everything Russian and cursing everything English. I believe (unlike the Tories) that Russia has improved herself wonderfully. I have a great admiration for the people of that country. I would like to see this country help them as much as she possibly can—they still need it, but I do

not believe that the methods adopted in Russia of late years could ever be a success here.

Perhaps I am just old-fashioned. Yet my observation does not lead me to believe that my countrymen have lost the instincts which have come down to them from their English past. A few weeks ago an extremely modern young man, who is a great friend of mine, told me that, whilst my ideas were very nice, I simply must move with the times. That made me laugh. I asked him to explain what he meant by moving with the times. He went into a long rigmarole about keeping up with the modern trend of thought and being always ready to accept new ideas—all obviously culled from his modern books. He became annoyed at my laughter, exclaiming: "There you are! In the typical old arrogant English manner you laugh at any ideas but your own." I pointed out to him with unashamed glee that in spite of his modern educated ideas I could (*a*) thrash him with one hand tied behind my back, (*b*) drink good beer with him until he went under the table, and then walk home by myself enjoying the night air, (*c*) eat more roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at one sitting than he could eat in three. I said a lot more things besides, but the first three really upset him and the argument grew more fierce. I think that the remark about drinking beer really hurt him. He is an ex-collier, and like most

colliers and Englishmen, he likes to think that he has a good capacity for beer. "My father," he said, "could drink any man in the village under the table, and then go home sober," and then, in a sudden flash of temper: "Who the hell are you, anyway? I am as English as you are! England is the best country in the world, but I don't need you to tell me so." This from my friend who accused me of "English arrogance." We went across to the local pub and had a "bitter" to smooth things over. When later on we were parting outside the pub door, he looked me over slowly and said: "You are about a foot taller than me, but any time you like we will go up to the fields to settle this argument, and," he said darkly, "you will want both hands free, because I will knock your block off."

The modern young people of to-day seem to me to be just floundering about amid a welter of ideas about none of which they can be certain. The rapidity with which they jump from one craze to another—Communism, Fascism, Realism and other "isms"—proves their uncertainty. Perhaps they would find more real happiness if they were old-fashioned. At least I can be certain about some of my ideas.

I have tried to tell my story truthfully and without bitterness. I have known the blackest misery and the brightest happiness, and I have

tried to tell of it all. By some people I shall be looked upon as a curiosity. By many of my own pals I may be looked upon as a liar, and by the more generous perhaps as a mere fool.

I am afraid that the reader who is accustomed to books which have been carefully planned out beforehand will think this effort of mine a very scrappy affair. I never seem to finish a chapter on the same theme as I began it on. If I start a chapter on poetry it finishes up as a chapter on coal-mines. But that is how I learned things—bit by bit. The beauty of the forest and of my books crept into the dark ways of the pit; the beauty of the character of my mates glowed in the fields and woods. I am unable to separate them, for together they make one huge poem in my mind. Out of my misery came greater joy, out of the blackness of the pit came a greater brightness, out of the coarse language came a love of good words and poetry, and out of it all a love of all things English. I have not written with the intention of converting anyone to my way of thinking. I have simply tried to tell the story of one miner's life without bias or prejudice, and if by so doing I have helped anyone to understand that section of the community to which I am proud to belong, then I shall be more than content.

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